

...I remind myself of somebody else.

Feeling like I'm chasing

Like I'm facing myself alone

I've got somebody else's thoughts in my head

I want some of my own...

I want some of my own...

Harry Potter and the Hero of Time

Chapter One—Going Back

Dear Remus,

How's everything going with you? I'm pretty much the same as always over here. The Dursleys have been kind of rough, especially after everything that happened, but they're staying in check okay. You know how it is.

I'm going back to Hogwarts tomorrow, so I won't be writing you so often to tell you that I'm okay. I'll still keep in touch, though, and I'll let you know everything that happens to me. Here's hoping I don't have much to tell other than that Gryffindor's winning every Quidditch game we play!

I'll write soon.

Harry

"C'mere, Hedwig," Harry called, laying down his quill. "I've got another letter for you."

The snowy owl hooted and fluttered from her perch down to his desk. As he fastened the parchment to her leg, he commented, "You've been getting a lot of exercise this summer, huh?"

She hooted again; Harry supposed that signalled agreement.

"All right," he said, holding out his arm for her to hop onto, "you know the drill."

Hedwig nipped his ear affectionately when he carried her to the window, then soared off into the night like a bright shadow. He watched her shrink to a white pinprick. Like a star.

He had been writing to Remus all summer, following the instructions the Order of the Phoenix members had given him at the end of the last term—"If we don't hear from you for three days in a row, we'll send someone along..." When he had composed his first letter, however, he had paused after the word "Dear." Dear who? "Dear Order of the Phoenix?" "Dear everybody?" He wanted to address it to a person rather than to a group so that he didn't feel any more like he was in the care of the government than he already did.

Eventually, he had decided to write to Remus Lupin, but even then, he hadn't known what to call the man. When they had first met, he had been Professor Lupin, but those days were long gone. In his head, Harry had always thought of him as simply Lupin, but that seemed impersonal; after all, it was people like Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle that he called by their surnames. But calling him Remus just sounded so *strange*, and Moony, even more so. In the end, he had uneasily headed the letter, "Dear Lupin." The response he had received had opened with:

Dear Harry,

I think we've progressed enough past the days of my being your teacher that you can call me by my first name.

So that had become the custom. It had been an adjustment, but by now it felt normal, and he had grown much closer to Remus over the past two months through their correspondence. He now found himself glad that Remus no longer taught at Hogwarts, as they both would have found this formal relationship awkward. However, there was a significant part of him that wished Remus could have a steady job, just like there was a part of him that wished he could leave the Dursleys forever...

Harry sighed and returned to his desk. Life wasn't fair to him. Well, he was going back to Hogwarts tomorrow, he thought, and that was a ray of sunshine. Yet even school wasn't as much of an escape as it had once been, as it insisted on teaching him lessons the hard way, both in and out of the classroom. Life wasn't fair to witches and wizards any more than it was to Muggles.

One thing was finally fair, though, and this was the fact that the Dursleys didn't fight so hard against the idea of bringing Harry to King's Cross Station to catch his train. This was due, Harry knew, to the fact that the Order of the Phoenix was constantly breathing down their necks threateningly, and the only emotion the Dursleys felt towards wizards that was more strong than their hate was their fear.

Therefore Harry arrived, so visibly exhausted that he felt as if each train which pulled into the station was running him over, in time to slip through the barrier to platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ and meet up with his friends.

"I'm fine from here on," he told Uncle Vernon wearily, once his luggage was loaded onto a trolley and they stood near the first platform. He knew none of the Dursleys would object to leaving him; Aunt Petunia and Dudley had actually agreed to wait in the car rather than risk meeting up with any of Harry's peers. "You can go."

"Good," grunted Uncle Vernon, eyeing him beadily. He started to walk away, then turned back briefly enough to call, "I expect none of your little friends think I'm going to accompany you to catch your train, do they?" He was trying to sound irritable, but Harry knew it was fear of magical revenge that motivated him not to neglect his duties.

"No," Harry replied. "Actually, you can't come any further, and they might get mad at you if you tried."

This was enough for Uncle Vernon. He made a rough noise of agreement before hurrying away. Normally, the sight of Uncle Vernon scurrying away from a potential wizard encounter would have had Harry struggling not to burst at the seams with laughter, but he was so tired today that he simply managed a weak smile to himself.

"Let's go, Hedwig," he said, turning towards the (apparently) solid barrier between platforms 9 and 10. She, like him, was completely unperturbed by heading straight for it unflinchingly, and completely unsurprised when they emerged on the other side to find themselves in an open train station.

Now he had to find Ron and Hermione. It wouldn't be difficult, since they, as prefects, would be directing many of the younger students and troublemakers.

Sure enough, it took only moments before he heard the distinctive, bossy shouting that could only be one person.

"Hey! *Hey!* I already told you to leave him alone!"

Harry grinned. Life was looking better now, just because he had heard one of his friends' voices in place of one of the Dursleys'.

"Hermione!" he called, weaving his way through the crowd towards a bushy-haired almost sixteen-year-old girl who was at the moment pulling two brothers apart. She looked up when she heard her name, and her scowl broke into a smile.

"Harry! Just one second..." Turning back to the siblings, she warned sternly, "Stay out of trouble, or your head of house will find out as soon as we get there!"

One of the boys nodded sullenly, while the other only glared at his brother. After watching them forcefully a moment longer, she turned back to Harry and smiled again. "It's so good to see you! How was your—?"

Her voice died in mid-question when she realized what the answer would be. Harry shrugged, looking out over the crowd to avoid seeing the sympathy in her eyes, and answered as casually as he could, "All right. I kept in touch with Remus, and I've got the Dursleys terrified... Ron!"

He had spotted the only Weasley boy left at Hogwarts in the swirling mob of people. It wasn't hard, given Ron's distinct flaming hair and the fact that his height put him over most of the others' heads. He

looked around him at the sound of his friend's voice, and Harry waved to catch his attention. Spotting him, Ron beamed.

"Hi, Harry!"

Ron looked as if he were wading through water as he made his way towards Harry and Hermione. After nearly tripping over a particularly scrawny new student, who scrambled away in terror, he ran his fingers through his hair in stress and commented, "Is it just me, or do the first-years get smaller every time?"

"It's you," Hermione told him, in a tone that meant that she didn't feel his observation was entirely appropriate to be made in front of the people it concerned.

Not that any of the new pupils noticed, of course. Three of them were currently mobbing a fourth for some reason, and it was impossible to say whether their intent was malicious or not. With a sigh, Hermione started towards them.

"Well, they do get more bratty, at least," Ron muttered as he headed after her, but he had the courtesy to lower his voice this time. Whether this was to keep the first-years from hearing him or just Hermione, Harry couldn't say.

"Harry! Oh, Harry!"

Another familiar voice, this time belonging to Ron's mother. Preparing his well-rehearsed happy expression, Harry turned around to face her.

"Hi, Mrs Weasley," he said. He particularly hoped that she wouldn't dote too much over him, because if she started treating him like a child, he would be tempted to act like one. However, he knew better than to expect her to resist the urges of her maternal instincts, and the cautiously caring smile on her face indicated that his expectations were going to be met.

"How are you doing, Harry, dear?" she asked. "I mean, really. How are you?"

"I'm doing well," he lied, impressed with himself for how well he was managing to fake it. "I'm glad to be going back to school." That much was at least basically true.

"I'm glad to hear that," Mrs Weasley told him genuinely, still smiling. "If you need anything during the year, anything at all, you know you can write to us, dear."

"Yes, Mrs Weasley, of course I do. But I've got Dumbledore, so I'm sure I'll be fine." He even managed to laugh, and she seemed to find this adequate reassurance that he was as okay as he claimed.

"Harry!" came Ron's voice. "Hey, Harry, can you help out over here?"

"Oh, you should go," Mrs Weasley said. "I've got to find Ginny. Have a good trip, dear. And have a good year, too."

"I will," Harry promised, making his way towards Ron and Hermione. "Goodbye, Mrs Weasley."

When he arrived at his friends' side, Ron muttered, "You're welcome."

"Huh?" asked Harry, bewildered.

"For getting you away from Mum," he explained.

"What? Why? She wasn't doing anything."

"Not yet," Ron warned darkly. "You have no idea. All summer, all she's been able to talk about is you. Wondering how you're coping, worrying that something's happened to you... Lupin told her about all your letters, but it didn't help. I haven't seen her so tied in a knot since you were in the Triwizard Tournament."

Harry took this in and digested it carefully. "Hm," he said simply. Retrospectively, maybe it was better that Ron had gotten him away before Mrs Weasley had gone completely into her mother mannerisms.

Twenty minutes later, everyone's belongings were loaded up on the train, and they were pulling out of the station. Ron and Hermione had

reported to the prefects' compartment, but they would be back soon. In the interim, Harry was waiting for them, alone but not very lonely. He was leaning the side of his head against the window, watching the countryside zooming past, but this made him feel slightly nauseous, so he lifted his face and looked away, gazing around the empty train car with a sigh.

Normally at this time every year, Harry could feel his summer concerns falling back behind him along with the station as they sped north. This year, however, was different. It had been the same since he had left Hogwarts in June, though, so he wasn't entirely surprised. Disappointed, perhaps, but not surprised. His problems followed him everywhere now...

Shortly, Ron and Hermione returned.

"Sorry again that we had to leave you, Harry," Hermione said by way of greeting. "We hurried back."

"Hey, don't worry about it," Harry told her, waving the apology away with one hand as the two of them found their seats.

"So," Hermione began, "I have to tell you both what happened to me this summer."

"Good thing or bad thing?" Ron interrupted.

"Well... weird thing, I guess," she concluded thoughtfully.

Exchanging a look with Ron, Harry said slowly, "Okay, shoot."

Hermione sighed. "You know I've been keeping in touch with Viktor."

Harry nodded, and Ron grunted.

"And you know how he asked me back in fourth year to visit him that summer? Only I didn't, because we ended up doing all that Order of the Phoenix stuff instead, at Grimmauld Place."

"Right," Harry said, nodding. Ron didn't move, other than to fold his arms across his chest.

"Okay. He wrote to me over the summer and asked me to come to stay again, and I was going to go, but then my parents wouldn't let me. They think the age difference is too much for me to make a trip like that to see him..."

"How old is he?" Ron asked.

"He's twenty now."

"Well, they're right, then," he concluded bluntly.

Hermione gave an annoyed scoff. "You sound like you're talking to Ginny," she informed him scathingly. "I'm not your little sister, Ron."

"Maybe not, but I still don't think you should—"

"Anyway," Hermione interrupted firmly, "that's not all. I wrote and told him that I couldn't come, and first of all it took him much longer to answer than it normally would. When I finally got an answer, he said it was okay, he understood that 'things come up,' and if my parents disapproved, then maybe this was for the best."

Here she finished, and though she sounded thoroughly annoyed, neither Harry nor Ron knew exactly what had her upset.

"Er... So?" asked Harry, knowing even as he spoke that he was going to get a very short-tempered answer.

"So?" she echoed incredulously. "So it's obviously an excuse, isn't it? All that stuff about it being for the best and all that! Doesn't it just sound like the type of thing that he would say so that I don't feel so bad when he breaks up with me?"

"Breaks up with you?" Harry repeated. "Are you going out with him, then?"

Hermione hesitated. "That's what makes it odd," she said. "We've never really said whether we're...you know...a couple or not. So how could he be breaking up with me?" "Let's get one thing clear," Ron stated. "Did he break up with you? Did he say, 'I'm breaking up with you?'"

"No, but—"

"And you're not even sure if he's your boyfriend to begin with?"

"No, but—"

"So what's the problem, then?"

"I didn't say it was a problem. I said it was weird."

There was a pause, during which the two boys stared at the girl blankly.

"Never mind," she finally sighed in irritation.

Drizzle had been just beginning when Harry had left the Dursleys house that morning. By now, rain was teeming down outside the Hogwarts Express, and Harry was leaning drowsily against his seat; he hadn't slept the night before. Knowing that he would be returning to the wizarding world the next day had cause him such a mixture of excitement and anxiety that he had tossed and turned for hours instead. There was also a part of him that feared sleep, because sleep brought dreams, and dreams brought... He never knew what dreams would bring.

"Hey, Harry? Harry?"

It was Hermione's voice. Harry slowly opened his eyes to look at her. She and Ron were sitting in the floor, playing a game of Exploding Snap, but she was frowning up at Harry with her brows knit in concern.

"Yeah, what?" Harry asked.

"Are you feeling okay? You look as white as a ghost."

Harry rubbed his eyes. His scar prickled, but this was nothing unusual.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just haven't been sleeping well..." he told her, and as if to illustrate this, a huge yawn forced itself out of his body, leaving him even more tired than before.

"We've got a few more hours 'til we get to Hogwarts," Ron said, without looking up from his cards. "Try to catch a nap on the train here."

"That's what I was doing," Harry said, leaning back again in his seat and closing his eyes.

He wasn't sure if he was asleep or not from that point on. Part of him was aware that he was sitting on the train, but part of him wasn't; part of him was experiencing ridiculous dreams about unimportant things, but part of him knew they were only dreams. Either way, he felt as though he was slipping sideways into consciousness when Ron shook him awake.

"We're here, Harry. Get up. Oh, and you'd better change."

Harry sat up heavily, realizing that he was still in his Muggle clothes. Ron had changed into his robes, and Hermione was nowhere to be seen.

"I've gotta go help Hermione with...y'know, prefect stuff," Ron muttered. Harry knew he didn't enjoy his duties, but it was still funny the way he tried to make them sound like torture in a continued effort to make Harry feel better for not having them.

"Okay. Thanks for waking me up," said Harry, reaching for his luggage to pull out his robes. Ron looked at him for a moment, apparently making sure he wasn't going to drop off to sleep again, then exited the compartment. Harry locked the door after him.

As he changed his clothes, Harry thought ahead to the year he knew was coming. Would it be a good one? Not likely; horrible things never failed to happen to him at school. But there would be good parts, of course. He was the Quidditch captain this year, as the most experienced and skilled player on the team. There were also his classes, which no longer included Potions and Divination; to his delight, he had earned a remarkably good grade in Potions, but it

wasn't quite good enough to allow him entrance into the NEWT Potions class. There was also the fact that he got to be with his friends again. Perhaps the biggest change from the previous year, however, was a bittersweet one: everyone had now accepted that he hadn't been lying about Voldemort's return and everything else he had been claiming for years, including the facts that families such as Draco Malfoy's were all Death Eaters, and that Sirius Black was innocent...

A dull, stabbing pain suddenly swooped down upon his stomach and made him feel sick. He was finally free to admit that he and Sirius had been in contact, but Sirius wasn't there anymore for him to be in contact with. Every few minutes over the summer, the reality of it had struck him painfully, and he had become so consumed with grief that even Dudley had asked him what was the matter. Harry always replied, "You wouldn't understand." Usually Dudley left it at that.

But the last time this had happened, Dudley had pressed for more information. "One of your freak problems?" he had sneered. "Did you have a fight with one of your freak friends? Last year you were always crying in your sleep over Cedric—'Dad, help, he killed Cedric!'"

"Shut up, Dudley," Harry had growled, feeling his rage rise within him. But Dudley loved to tease Harry, and simply refused to learn that it wasn't a safe hobby.

"You haven't been crying about Cedric this year, though. Don't you like him anymore? It's someone new now... Who's Sirius?"

Harry's hand that was gripping his school tie, hundreds of miles away from Dudley on the Hogwarts Express, began to shake as he remembered the scene...

He had never been as angry with his cousin as he had been that minute. He had been unable to find words to express his fury. Dudley had laughed at the expression on Harry's face; it had been blank with blind hatred.

"Too bad Sirius left you, huh? 'No, Sirius, come back! Sirius! No!' I guess he didn't care about you, huh? But you still care about him,

don't you? 'He's coming back, he has to, he has to! He's not...' He's not what? You never say."

At that point, Harry had flown at Dudley in an explosion of misdirected rage. He had sworn and screamed and sent his fists and feet flying, so viciously that Dudley had been unable to fight back; after all, being well fed and cared for at Hogwarts and training intensely for Quidditch meant that Harry wasn't nearly as small as he had been in the days when Dudley had used him for a punching bag. In fact, he now stood taller than his cousin.

Harry's intense grief and long-contained anger had also manifested themselves in several accidental spells all at that moment: the lamp and light fixture in the living room had both exploded, as had the television. Several china ornaments on the mantle had shattered as well, adding their shards to the glass that littered the carpet. Dudley had been howling, but Harry had not stopped beating every inch of him that he could.

It was at this point that the Dursleys had come home. Harry remembered clearly that Uncle Vernon, puffing like a rhino, had wrestled him off of Dudley and thrown him into an armchair.

"He started it," Harry had said quickly, almost automatically, but Uncle Vernon had immediately launched into a screaming lecture which Harry couldn't remember most of, having blocked it out easily until the moment when he had decided to scream back.

"...if you ever dare hurt my son again—"

"If he ever speaks to me about Sirius again—"

"Don't you interrupt me, boy, unless you want me to—"

"I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU DO TO ME!"

Harry had been on his feet, in Uncle Vernon's face, shouting.

"What's the worst you can do to me! Starve me for a week, a month, lock me in my room, beat me within an inch of my life!" He had thrust

his arms out, palms up as if offering penance. "Here, here's my wrists—Slit them if you want! I've dealt with worse!"

Then he had stormed away towards the stairs, the silence in the living room palpable. He had turned back, though, to say one more thing, perfectly calmly.

"But... If Dudley—if any of you—ever mention the name Sirius Black to my face again, I will kill you with my bare hands."

Harry found himself sitting on the train bench again, rubbing his face with his hands, still trembling slightly at the memory of the sound of his own voice, the memory he was trying to rub away.

Another voice came into his mind, unbidden...

"Did you *love* him, little baby Potter?"

He hated her more than the Dursleys. He hated her—As much as? More than?—Voldemort.

The train was grinding to a halt, and this brought Harry back to the present firmly. He began awkwardly to unload his own luggage as well as that of Ron and Hermione, who were still occupied with their prefect chores, somewhere. As he pulled down Hedwig's cage and beckoned his owl to fly into it, he heard a voice behind him.

"Harry! Need some help?"

"Hi, Ginny," Harry said without turning around; he knew her voice. "That'd be great. Could you grab Pig's cage?"

"Anything I can help with?"

Now Harry turned, to confirm his suspicion, and found that he was right. It was Dean Thomas who had spoken, and Seamus Finnigan and Neville Longbottom were next to him. Harry noticed that the same weariness of suffering that marked his own face was written across Neville's.

Meeting Dean's gaze, Harry said, "That'd be great. Maybe you could help with Ron's trunk?"

Between the five of them, they managed to unload all the bags of their two compartments. They dumped their burdens into a carriage drawn by a Thestral, which Harry and Neville carefully avoided looking at, though Harry did hear a voice in his head again...

"I would have died before I betrayed them..." "You'll see me very soon, Harry, I promise you..." "Look after yourself..."

He didn't want to forget a single word Sirius had ever said to him, but it hurt so much to remember.

To distract himself, Harry looked around for Ron and Hermione as Neville climbed into the carriage after Seamus and Dean. Ginny was still standing outside it, and, Harry noticed, she was staring directly at the Thestral, for all the world as though she could see it.

"Er... Ginny?" he asked uncertainly.

"There's a Thestral here, isn't there?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah, there is," Harry said uncomfortably. "You can't see it...can you?"

"No."

After a moment, she snapped her gaze off of the invisible horse and said to Harry, "It's unfair of them to have these things here. They must remind you all the time of—stuff you don't want to think about."

Harry didn't know what to say to this comment, so he made an indistinct noise in his throat and was about to wonder aloud where Ron and Hermione were when they appeared at his side.

"Glad that's over," grumbled Ron, climbing into the carriage. Ginny, Harry and Hermione followed.

"Good that it's stopped raining, isn't it?" commented Hermione; Harry hadn't even noticed. "Oh, and the new password's screech owl."

They didn't talk much on the ride up to the castle. Harry remained quiet out of fearful anticipation, Ron was too busy sulking at the sight of Ginny seated next to Dean, and Hermione was reading a book she had been carrying when she arrived. The other four made small talk to catch up, but not much else. Harry stared up at the approaching castle and, despite his general feeling of dissatisfaction with life, he felt a bubble of contentment and peace swell within him. Hogwarts was his home, and since there wasn't much outside it that he liked, he had to admit he was pleased to have arrived.

He was even more pleased when he settled himself with Ron and Hermione at the Gryffindor house table, which always looked as though it had been waiting for them, and gazed up at the staff table. Hagrid and McGonagall were absent, since they were dealing with the first-years, but Dumbledore was there. He was sitting in the centre of the high table in his large, golden chair, chatting with Professor Flitwick on his right.

"Hey— New teacher!" said Ron, pointing. Harry and Hermione both followed his finger.

The witch he indicated looked quite young. Her hair was light brown and pulled into a short ponytail, there were freckles across her face, and she looked to be rather athletically built and tall, though it was hard to say from their vantage point. She was leaning her chin in the heel of her hand casually with her elbow on the table, listening to what Professor Sinistra was telling her. She was seated at the far left of the table, in the place Hagrid usually occupied.

"Defence Against the Dark Arts," Hermione said. "Well, obviously. I wonder what she's like."

At that moment, Hagrid arrived and noticed the witch in his seat. They watched as he bent to inform her that she was to sit further along, gesturing to a vacant seat near Dumbledore, and she laughed when she realized her mistake. She got up obligingly, apparently apologizing for the confusion. Both she and Hagrid were speaking without the typical formalities usually extended by and to new teachers, rather as though they already knew each other. Hagrid gave her a friendly pat on the back as she left his seat, which nearly

sent her dropping right back into it. She stopped herself by leaning against the table for support.

"I think she's friends with Hagrid," said Harry.

Ron and Hermione, both of whom had been looking around elsewhere, turned their heads back to the staff table again. Just as they did, the teacher found her seat and looked out over the crowd. She met their gaze and gave them a friendly smile and wave, which knocked over the (empty) goblet before her.

"Do we know her?" asked Ron under his breath as they waved back uncertainly.

"I don't think so... Do we?"

Their conversation fell silent when the doors to the Great Hall opened wide. McGonagall entered, followed by the usual trail of nervous-looking first-years and carrying the Sorting Hat, which she placed on a stool at the head of the hall. Every student in the hall hushed, focused on the Hat, which began to sing.

It told them, as usual, about the four houses. It also told them, as it had done the year before, about the importance of unity among those houses. Ron surprised no one by urging it to hurry because of his hunger.

When the Hat finished, by warning them that the qualities of all of the houses were valuable in the face of adversity, the Sorting began.

"Beneatha, William!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

"Bradley, Ryan!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

Harry found he wasn't very interested; the whole process had gotten rather old by now, especially when compared with other events in his life. He listened for the new Gryffindors, however, and picked out four

new boys and three new girls. He also noticed dimly that this year seemed to have many kids of the right mesomorphic body type for Quidditch, but nothing more detailed than that. In fact, his mind was firmly elsewhere, or rather, nowhere, until he heard Dumbledore's voice.

"...to welcome you tonight!" he was saying. "There are many things that I need to say to you all this evening, but I am sure that I could never be riveting enough to take your attention away from your stomachs, so I will restrain myself until we have completed our traditional feast!"

At his words, the tables magically filled with the delicious handiwork of the one hundred house-elves in the Hogwarts kitchens.

"Good old Dumbledore," Ron said happily, loading up his plate.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, though he liked the Headmaster for reasons other than the food he provided. There was just something about knowing that Albus Dumbledore was in the room that made Harry feel safe, even when everything else was going wrong. Similarly, the Hogwarts food at the first feast of the year always tasted like the best food he had ever eaten, because along with it came the peace and satisfaction of being home again. Or maybe it was just because it always came after a summer of near starvation in Privet Drive.

Either way, Harry soon found himself full to bursting with good food, and ready to listen to whatever speech Dumbledore was about to give them as he rose to his feet again.

"Welcome," he said again, his voice carrying out across the hall. "Tonight, I will begin not with the basics, the things you all know, which I nevertheless believe important enough to repeat, but instead with the more significant matters which I have not yet had a chance to properly address before you all."

He cleared his throat, and Harry closed his eyes in sudden dread. He knew what was coming next, and he also knew he was not alone at Hogwarts in his ability to list off several important people Voldemort had taken from him. Why did this have to haunt him everywhere he went?

"You are all aware," Dumbledore began seriously, "that in June of last year, Lord Voldemort returned to power. I must point out the seriousness of the threat he poses to us all. Many of us have experienced firsthand the suffering he can cause, though all of you are too young to have lived through his reign over fifteen years ago. We have witnessed this suffering in the form of the families and loved ones he has killed and destroyed.

"I emphasize to you all the importance of inter-house unity. We must fortify ourselves against the forces outside these walls, which are trying to bring them down. In explaining the value of trust and faithfulness, I must also call your attention to recent developments in a story that first made headlines three years ago...the escape of Sirius Black."

Murmurs of fear spread across the hall. They had heard the story Harry had told at the end of his third year, that Sirius was innocent, but they hadn't believed him. As usual. Now it must have been dawning on them that Voldemort's resurrection meant Sirius' cleared name. They were realizing it three months too late.

"Sirius Black is not now and never has been in the past a murderer. The twelve Muggles for whose murder he was imprisoned in fact died at the hands of Peter Pettigrew, long believed to be the thirteenth victim of the massacre, now known to be the criminal behind it. Sirius has fought as devoutly as any man, more devoutly than most, against Voldemort since the age of nineteen, not fearing to speak his name, doing much to stop the Death Eaters' progress towards gaining power. Azkaban itself could not stop his battle. This has always been the truth. However..."

Harry glanced at Snape, who had hated Sirius since their childhood. Snape's face was stony, his gaze focused on his plate, and Harry felt a stab of annoyance towards him.

"However," Dumbledore repeated, "Sirius will no longer be fighting with us against the forces of dark wizardry. Shortly before his name was cleared by the Ministry, mere hours before, in fact... Sirius Black was murdered by one of Lord Voldemort's Death Eaters."

Dumbledore's voice was trembling, albeit so slightly that most probably didn't notice, and it was this more than anything else that made Harry feel nauseous with grief again. He stared at his empty plate. There was perfect silence in the Great Hall.

"In short, Voldemort claimed the life of yet another great man less than three months ago, and though no one in this hall is to blame, we can all learn something from the experience of having known, loved, hated and lost that man. Had there been unity among those of us who choose to fight Voldemort, perhaps the life of Sirius Black could have been spared... I beg all of you to remember that, if you do not fight against evil, you help it progress... Do not let Sirius' life and death have been in vain..."

Harry wished desperately that he were not in the audience listening to this speech.

"I will leave that topic on that solemn note," Dumbledore said quietly, regaining control of his voice. "I turn now to matters of bureaucracy."

He paused before going on. In a voice of cheerfulness that Harry knew was forced, he said, "I am in no doubt that you will all be pleased to learn that Professor Umbridge is no longer with us as High Inquisitor of Hogwarts. The educational decrees passed under her authority, that is, decrees number twenty-four onward, are no longer in effect in this school, and nor is number twenty-three. Replacing Professor Umbridge in her post as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, may I introduce Professor Tonks."

"*Tonks*?" gasped Harry and Ron in unison, as Hermione said, "Oh!"

"Tonks? As in...Tonks? What's-her-face?" Ron mumbled.

Harry let out a snort of laughter. The name "what's-her-face" was certainly appropriate for a Metamorphmagus. "Must be," he said.

"What's wrong with her? She looked happy a minute ago."

"Well, that was before Dumbledore mentioned...you know," Hermione explained delicately. "I mean, he was her uncle or something, wasn't he?"

"Her mother's cousin," Harry said, still observing Tonks, who was looking down at her plate unhappily. They couldn't make out her expression clearly, but Harry was quite certain he could guess what it looked like.

Dumbledore was now reviewing school rules about staying out of the Forbidden Forest and Hogsmeade, not using of magic out of class, and many other things that Harry, Ron and Hermione were likely to do anyway. Tonks soon was looking acceptably pleasant again, and by the time they were dismissed, she and Harry both had managed to start smiling and acting normally. Harry didn't even try to avoid the swarm of Gryffindors heading up to the common room, led by Ron and Hermione, which included more than one gaping first-year. That feeling of being at peace with the world, which he only got from arriving at Hogwarts after a long summer spent in the company of the Dursleys, was coming over him at long last.

Chapter Two—Strange Dreams and Harsh Reality

On their way to spend their first night back in their dormitories, the Gryffindors were halfway down a hallway lined with portraits of medieval knights and ladies when Nearly Headless Nick drifted through a wall towards them. Many of the first- and second-years jumped, but the older students had long grown used to the fact that anything and anyone could pop out of anywhere at Hogwarts. Nick, too, was used to receiving reactions of varying degrees of surprise at his appearance, and disregarded them all equally. He simply looked the students over and, spotting Harry, said, "Ah, Mr Potter, just who I was looking for! The Headmaster would like a word."

Now Harry was disconcerted.

"I've only been at school an hour!" he protested. "How can I be in trouble already?"

Nick raised his transparent eyebrows and tugged on the ruff which held his partially severed head onto his body. "I didn't say you were in trouble. Perhaps Dumbledore has something good to say to you."

Harry frowned doubtfully. "When was the last time any teacher called me to their office to say something good?"

Ron snickered, and Hermione shot him a look.

"All right," sighed Harry, dropping out of the crowd as it continued on. "I'm going. But I don't know the password."

"It's chocolate," Nick told him simply.

"Dumbledore must be running out of ideas," Harry muttered to himself as he headed in the direction of the Headmaster's office.

When he reached the stone gargoyle which marked the door to Dumbledore's office, Harry stated, "Chocolate." It jumped aside, revealing a moving, spiral staircase, which Harry stepped on and rode up to the familiar door with the brass lion's head knocker. As he rapped upon it, he reflected inwardly that he had likely been to the

Headmaster's office more than any other student, and possibly more than some teachers.

"Come in," said Dumbledore's voice, sounding uncharacteristically weary; of course, weariness was becoming more and more in character for him lately. Harry opened the door and entered.

The Headmaster was sitting at his desk, reading. He closed the large and very old-looking book in his hands when Harry approached to sit in the chair facing him.

"Hello, Harry," Dumbledore began; his smile was, reassuringly, as warm as ever. "Back at school in safety, I see?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, glad that he could honestly say this statement was true. "Nearly Headless Nick said you wanted to see me?"

"I did," Dumbledore agreed with a nod, leaning forward in his desk. "I just wanted to ask you how your life has been since June."

"It's..."

Harry faltered. The question was not an easy one to answer. Dumbledore wanted the truth, a real answer, not just a standard, "Fine, thanks, how about you?"

Letting out his breath in a heavy sigh, Harry admitted, "It's been tough. I..." He tried to go on, but no words came, so he simply repeated, "It's been tough. I don't really know what else to say."

"Have you still been subjected to the influences of Lord Voldemort's mind within your own?" asked Dumbledore quietly.

"Er... A bit. I've been practicing making my mind blank over the summer—you know, Occlumency stuff—but it hasn't really been working..."

"Unsurprising," Dumbledore told him, obvious not at all concerned by this news. "Your powerful emotions are your only weapon against Voldemort, as you know, as well as one of your weaknesses. And

right now, you must be particularly emotional. Even if this were not the case, mastering the ability to close your mind when you choose to, in the safe, non-magical world of your mother's family, would be very different from doing so when you need to, in a potentially dangerous magical environment. You are, of course, very familiar with the difference between using spells in theory and in practice...in rehearsal and in performance, you might say."

Harry thought of the Patronus Charm and nodded.

"Now... Have you been having nightmares?" Dumbledore asked gently. Harry suspected he knew the answer already; unpleasant dreams were a constant in the life of the boy who lived, and had been since he had learned his own story more than five years ago. There was no shame in admitting it.

"Yes. Some are just flashbacks, where I revisit things. The graveyard, sometimes, but usually..." Harry's voice trailed off.

"The Department of Mysteries?" supplied Dumbledore.

Harry nodded, throat tight. He wanted to say something about how Dudley had heard him screaming and crying, but he couldn't think of how to word this.

"Some are flashbacks," Dumbledore echoed, leaving Harry's grief untouched, "and what are the others?"

Harry paused, considering his answer. His other dreams seemed like flashbacks, too, only...not his own. They had been puzzling him all summer, and he was actually glad Dumbledore had asked about them. He definitely wanted to vocalize the uncertainty and confusion that these peculiar dreams—not necessarily nightmares, really, just scenes in his mind—had been causing him. Besides that, he had always felt that the Headmaster would have all the answers to such questions as these, and answers were definitely what he wanted.

"Well," he began slowly, unable to find adequate words, "I see things that happened...in the past, I think. But they didn't happen to me. And I don't think they happened to Voldemort, either," he added.

"What sorts of things?"

"Lots. Different stuff, but it's always from someone's point of view, not just the outside, and I think it's always the same person. Sometimes I—well, whoever I am in the dream—I'm in the forest with all these kids, and they're making fun of me. Other times, I'm riding a horse a horse or stuff like that. There's some people that come up a lot that I think are my friends or family or something like that..."

After considering this, Dumbledore asked, "Do you ever dream about yourself fighting anyone or anything? Do you ever see a figure this person hates?"

This time, Harry knew that Dumbledore knew the answer to the question before he asked it.

"Yes, quite a bit. There's this man..."

"What does he look like?"

"He's... Well, he's tall," Harry began to explain slowly. "He has sort of dark skin, like someone from around the Middle East, I guess. He's got really bright red hair, and a big ruby or something in his forehead. He's always dressed in clothes like armour, and sometimes he rides this huge black horse... And he has magic powers, but I don't know if he's exactly a wizard."

"I understand what you mean," Dumbledore assured him. "Now, I have two more small questions about these dreams. First, how old is the person you are?"

This question surprised Harry, first of all because it seemed like such an unimportant detail, but also because the answer was an unusual one that he had been trying to determine for himself.

"Er...I don't exactly know. It changes. Sometimes I'm a kid, younger than I am now. But then other times, I think I'm an adult. And there's those people, my friends— They're different ages in different dreams, and if they're growing up, then I must be, too, right?"

"One would assume," Dumbledore agreed. "My second question," he went on, "is about this man you mentioned. Are you afraid of him?"

Another odd question, but one Harry had never given any consideration to before. He looked at his hands in his lap and tried to recall such a details. What he came up with was another odd answer.

"Yes," he said finally. "But only sometimes. When I'm a kid, I think. When I'm an adult...it doesn't seem like I'm scared of anything." He finished the statement almost like a question, asking Dumbledore to give credence to the possibility of its accuracy.

No answer came, however, and Harry looked up during the pause. Dumbledore was leaning back in his chair and regarding the ceiling thoughtfully, his long fingers tented at his chin. After a moment, he looked back down and said, "Thank you, Harry. You have given me a great deal of useful information. Now, allow me to give you some."

He pushed the book before him towards Harry, along with a piece of parchment. Harry picked the book up and looked at it closely; it was ancient and thick, with a cover of green leather and a title in elaborately worked gold letters, which Harry read aloud.

"*The History of...* what?"

"Hyrule," Dumbledore told him.

"What's Hyrule?"

"For me to give you the full answer to that question would take many hours. That is why I am giving you this book to read."

Opening the heavy tome with great care, Harry found that the pages were decorated with finely detailed illuminations and borders, but also filled with small, precise handwriting, as though the book was so old it had been written out by hand in the days before the printing press. Looking more closely, Harry also noticed that several of the pages were filled with characters that obviously formed words, but they weren't anything like letters he had even seen. They were even on the cover, he noticed, checking again, right below the title.

What popped into his mind instantly was Hermione; this was the type of fascinating ancient literature that she would kill to get her hands on, but that he, Harry, would rather avoid. That being said, he couldn't deny that the artwork and detailing were truly remarkable, and that he was curious to know why the contents of this volume were of any significance to him.

"I know sixth year pupils such as yourself do not have much leisure time for reading," Dumbledore acknowledged. "There is an increase in homework as next year's NEWTs approach, and you in particular will of course be busy with your new duties as Quidditch captain. That is why I am not asking you to read the entire book, but only these chapters." He tapped the piece of parchment. "They should give you the information you need. This book is one of the best on Hylian history, although I must admit I do find it lacking in some background details, with regards to the central figures' lives outside public eye."

Harry looked at the list. It read:

Introduction – p. iii

1. The Creation – p. 2

2. Holy Relics and Temples – p. 21

7. The Quest of the Hero of Time – p. 113

8. Under Queen Zelda I – p. 133

12. The First Return of Evil – p. 220

15. The Second Return of Evil – p. 285

21. Destroyed and Rebuilt – p. 372

23. Tetra and the Hero of Winds – p. 409

24. Noah and the Cleansing of the New World – p. 434

28. Plato – p. 498

29. The Unanswered Questions and Unsolved Mysteries – p. 519

Conclusion – p. xi

Harry raised his eyebrows. "This sounds like a book of mythology or something. Maybe philosophy?" he guessed, looking at Plato's name. He was also puzzled by the mention of Noah.

"I suppose you could call it that," Dumbledore agreed with a nod. "It is filled with stories that were passed down by ancient civilizations. However, they are not myths, because they are true. It is imperative that you remember that as you read this: No matter how absurd these stories may seem, they are all true."

Not knowing what else to say, Harry replied, "Okay."

"I must also impress upon you how important it is that you read this as quickly as possible, Harry. Again, to explain why would take a great deal of time, but if you would like some idea, turn to chapter seven."

Harry obeyed, finding page 113, and gave a jump of alarm. There, glaring out at him from the book, was a picture of the enemy in his nightmares: a broad-shouldered, muscular man with hair like fire, spikes on his war-suited clothing, fingers like claws that could crush a man to powder, and a long dagger sheathed at the back of his leg. Without taking time to look any more closely at the illustration, Harry slammed the book shut reflexively.

"That's him!" he shouted, more loudly than he had intended. Lowering his voice slightly to a normal conversation level, he asked, "Does that mean...my dreams really did happen?"

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I believe so. I believe this book will answer many of your questions. Indeed, when you have finished it, you should be able to tell me if your dreams really happened."

Harry nodded. His heart was still beating quickly from the unpleasant surprise of seeing the man who, next to Voldemort, induced in him more terror than any other. The difference was that he had no idea why he should be scared of this complete stranger, even if he did look intimidating. The fear didn't feel like his, just as the memories weren't his, but were simply taking life vicariously in his dreams.

Carefully, Harry opened the book again to the picture. The man grinned menacingly up at him, taking apparent pleasure in the teenage boy's anxiety. Like all wizard pictures, he was moving, leaning against the decorative border with crossed arms and looking around him uninterestedly. He began to tap his toe and drum the fingers of his right hand against his left arm.

"It's getting late," Dumbledore pointed out, interrupting Harry's train of thought. "You should get a good night's sleep before your first classes."

"Yeah..." said Harry vaguely, not really listening as he read the caption on the illustration.

Ganondorf Dragmire (7188-7180 BCE) - King of the Gerudo and of Hyrule.

Harry ran as quickly as he could to the Gryffindor Tower, but he still arrived after most people had gone to bed. No one lasted long in the common room on the first day back after summer. Hermione herself was just heading up the stairway to the girls' dormitory, Crookshanks in her arms.

"Hey, Hermione!" Harry called out to her. "I need to talk to you and... Where's Ron?"

"Right here," answered Ron, poking his head around the corner of the staircase leading up to the boys' dorms. "We were beginning to think you weren't coming back, so we decided to go to bed."

"Harry, what's *that*?"

Hermione's interest had, of course, bee-lined to the massive volume Harry was holding. She was staring at it with wide eyes.

"It's what Dumbledore wanted to talk to me about," Harry replied, sitting down at a small table. The book thumped heavily when he lay it down before him. Clearly curious, Ron and Hermione emerged from their respective staircases to sit on either side of Harry, Hermione releasing her cat as she did so, though he followed her as if he, too, were curious about the book.

"*The History of...* what?" asked Ron, reading the title.

"That's what I asked," Harry told him.

"It's hard to read those letters. Hy...rule," Hermione sounded it out. She looked up at Harry, alarmed and bewildered, apparently at having come across a word with which she was unfamiliar. "What on earth is Hyrule?"

Shrugging, Harry said, "A place, I think. Well, it must be, to have a history, right? Dumbledore just told me to read this. Parts of it, anyway. And let me show you something."

He flipped to page 113, where Ganondorf stood, now examining his fingernails in a bored way. As they looked at him, Harry told Ron and Hermione about his nightmares.

"Wow," muttered Ron, but Hermione was now looking at a picture on the page opposite Ganondorf's, which Harry hadn't regarded yet; it showed a good-looking young man with large blue eyes and golden blond hair that hung before them casually. He was dressed in a green tunic and matching hat, with leather boots that buckled below his knees. Slung across his back were a sword, shield and quiver of arrows with a bow. Like Ganondorf, he was very clearly in good physical shape as a result of training in combat. As the young man looked around him, Harry noticed that both of his ears were pierced with silver hoops, and that the ears themselves were very long and pointed, like those of elves in Muggle fairy tales he had read as a child. Now that he thought of it, this man (or boy; he looked to be in his late teens) looked very much like an elf from the forest. With his weaponry and serious expression, however, he didn't give off the appearance having of a playful, elfin air.

"Sir Link I Hero," Hermione read aloud from the caption. "7197-7123 BCE... Hero of Time."

"That's funny. He looks younger than Ganondorf, but he was born nine years earlier," Ron observed.

"Don't be silly. Besides the fact that these pictures might not have been done at the same time, Ganondorf was a king, so the years by

his name were the years he reigned. He was an adult, probably, when he ascended in 7188." She said all this, as was her typical style, as though it was common knowledge, and Ron and Harry were a bit dim for not realizing it.

"So you've seen this Ganondorf guy in your nightmares," Ron said, ignoring Hermione pointedly by turning to Harry. "Have you ever seen this other one? Link?"

"Never."

"Really? Weird," Ron commented, as Hermione nodded thoughtfully, still looking at the book.

"Yeah. I wonder who he is."

Hermione looked up to roll her eyes at them incredulously. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Not everything is obvious to people less gifted than you," Ron snapped.

Choosing to disregard this, Hermione explained, "Well, if Link and Ganondorf are contemporaries, both important figures, who both probably know each other, and Harry only ever sees one of them in his dreams, which, I might add, are first-person perspective, then obviously Harry is dreaming from the point of view of the other. Which would be Link."

"But the person I dream as hates Ganondorf!" Harry pointed out. "And if Ganondorf was a king and Link was a knight, then wouldn't they be on the same side?"

"Don't be so sure." Hermione nodded down at the book, and Harry and Ron saw that Link and Ganondorf had each spotted the other across the pages. The historical figures eyed one another threateningly; Ganondorf was flexing his vicious fingers and the muscles in his massive arms, and Link had drawn the long, shining sword that he handled with notable skill and grace.

"Well, if it's a fight about brute strength, I think the king's got the kid beat," Ron said bluntly. "But that is one hell of a sword that Link's got."

"I wonder if they can hear us," Harry muttered quietly, watching as Link examined his blade with satisfaction before sheathing it again on his back.

"I wonder if they can hear each other," Ron asked keenly. "I mean, what if Ganondorf threatens Link or something and they get into a fight?"

"All the paintings here at Hogwarts can talk to each other, and to us," Hermione mused. "So unless someone put a spell on these to stop them communicating...which they might have done... It would be a good idea if they're going to fight... Anyway, Harry, was this all Dumbledore wanted to talk to you about?"

"Yeah. Well, he asked me how my summer was, and I told him about my dreams. But that's it."

Harry closed the book, because he didn't like the way Ganondorf and Link were posturing for battle. The three of them sat and looked at the cover for a moment, wondering what other mysteries were concealed within its pages.

"We should get to bed," Hermione said finally. "Listen, when you're done with that book, Harry, I'd like to read it."

"Figures," muttered Ron.

"Sure," agreed Harry.

They were the only ones left in the common room now, not that this was in any way an unusual occurrence. They said their good nights, then Hermione headed up one staircase and Ron followed Harry as he lugged the book up the other.

"Can't really blame her for wanting to read it, though," he admitted. "Looks pretty interesting. For a history textbook."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "I think I'll read some in bed."

Ten minutes later, as he lay curled in his four-poster bed and thinking yet again about how good it was to be back at Hogwarts, he carefully opened the book to the first page.

Painted in bright, lifelike colour across the top of the page, above the word "Introduction," was a map. A large, lush, green field dominated the landscape, but there were several other locations as well. He looked closely at small towns, a large mountain which he soon realized was a volcano, a lake, a desert, a forest... Everything was labelled in the two languages of the book. Some of the places had names along the lines of "Lon Lon Ranch" and "Kakariko Village," ones that he wouldn't have been surprised to see in Britain or any other Muggle country, but others were far more interesting, including "Zora's Domain" and "Haunted Wasteland," suggesting to him great danger and adventure.

Another picture, directly in the centre of the page, with the lines of the writing curving around it, showed a simple design of triangles, with a small but elaborately worked caption.

The Triforce of the Gods.

It consisted of three small and perfectly symmetrical gold triangles, touching at the corners to form a larger equilateral triangle with a hole in the middle, of size and shape equal to the first three.

Harry looked at this a moment, admiring the way the gold shone with a light that resembled something supernatural, before he began to read:

Long before the earliest human civilizations, there lived people so close to the divine world that they all knew and accepted the gift of magic. They believed in prophecies and potions, but one of the most predominant of their values was destiny.

The world of these people was called Hyrule, and was occupied by six races. The one which dominated, to whose monarchs the other races usually pledged allegiance, was the Hylians. However, history

would change these races, and leave us with those people who currently live on our planet: humans, including witches and wizards.

Few remember anymore the tales of the earliest people, but it is important not to forget the ways of our ancestors, for they have shaped our lives and our world...

Harry yawned. It read like a history textbook, all right; when would they get to the story? Blinking down at the pages, he skimmed for something more intriguing, and caught pieces of sentences.

The many legendary figures... spanning centuries... advanced technology... destroyed and rebuilt... unexplored regions... loss of important discoveries...

...from a humble orphan to a noble hero...

That was interesting.

Another yawn overpowered him. He closed the book, slid it onto the floor by his bed, and dropped to sleep without even taking off his glasses.

As McGonagall handed out Gryffindor timetables the next day over breakfast, Harry still felt as though he was walking around in a haze of tiredness. Fear and discontent at knowing that all was not well outside the school had returned to him the night before, as they always did when he was alone in the dark. He had hoped they would stop keeping him awake at night now that he was back at his haven, but no such luck. His disquiet had awakened him several times during the night, despite his exhaustion. To top it off, when he did sleep, his dreams were filled alternately with Voldemort attacking in the graveyard, or Death Eaters attacking in the Department of Mysteries, or Ganondorf attacking in places he didn't recognize. Link's nightmares.

"You look rough, Harry," Ron said sympathetically, making a face. "Here's hoping you get to start off with an easy day. What's your schedule like?"

Harry took a moment to focus his eyes well enough to read, then answered, "Transfigurations, Double Charms, Herbology and Double Defence Against the Dark Arts. You?"

"Same, but History of Magic instead of Herbology. So I guess I'm suffering more."

Harry managed a small smile at his friend's attempt at kindness.

"I'm in Herbology with you, Harry," Hermione said. "I had to cut two subjects, so I'm not in History or Magic or Astronomy anymore."

But Harry wasn't listening; he had just noticed something on his schedule at the mention of Professor Binns' subject. "I'm... Hang on!" he yelped. "I'm supposed to drop Potions this year, but they have me dropping History of Magic instead! I still have to put up with Snape!"

He looked up at his friends, horrorstruck. Hermione stared back, and Ron grabbed the offensive timetable.

"Blimey," he said weakly, after confirming that Harry was right about his fate. "How'd that happen?"

"What did you get on your OWLs, Harry?" Hermione asked slowly. "For Potions and History of Magic?"

Harry's stomach twinged. "Well...well... I got a 'P' on History—"

"That explains it," Ron said with a sage nod and disappointed sigh. "You can't go on to NEWTs if you didn't get an OWL."

"But I only got an 'E' in Potions!" Harry objected fervently. "Snape makes you get an 'O' if you want to continue!" Harry protested.

Hermione and Ron exchanged a look.

"Still," Hermione said, "if you have to keep one of them..."

Harry slumped irritably in his chair and stabbed at his waffles; they were the only appropriate targets for the irritability which was fast settling itself permanently into the place of yesterday's preliminary

good mood. "Perfect. Just perfect. The one thing I was really looking forward to about this year more than anything else is gone. That's just great."

Ron and Hermione glanced at each other, apparently not knowing what to say. They all remained silent as they finished breakfast and headed off to Transfiguration together. Part of Harry knew it was unfair to complain, since Hermione had to take Potions, too, and Ron had had to cut three classes instead of the usual two (Herbology, Potions, and Divination) due to poor grades, but most of him was in a rage at this unpleasant surprise. Why couldn't he, like Ron, simply drop an extra course? Why did he have to endure another two years with the one man at Hogwarts, and indeed almost in the entire world, he hated more than any other? The man who hated him back for no reason other than that his father was James Potter? The man who had taunted Sirius and called him a coward? The man who had, in short, made it a personal mission to make Harry suffer in every imaginable way? At the end of last year, it had been Snape upon whom Harry had tried to blame Sirius' untimely murder, and to this day he couldn't let go of the resolution that the potions master was partly responsible.

"Good morning, class," Professor McGonagall was saying; Harry had arrived at Transfiguration almost without noticing it. He dropped his books heavily on a desk before him and sat down next to Ron. He thought he saw McGonagall shoot him a warning look for being loud, but he wasn't in a mood to care. His first class hadn't even started, and already this was a bad day.

"Now, first of all, congratulations," McGonagall began now that the class was silent. "You all must have performed very well on your Transfiguration OWLs to have met the standards of my NEWT class. That being said, I have only two years to teach you everything that remains for you to learn about Transfiguration. This year will consist of three main units, all of which will be continued in your seventh year: Conjuring, Untransfiguration, and Self-transfiguration. You received your introduction to Conjuring Spells at the end of last year, so that is where we shall begin this year. Let's review the theories of *Inanimatus Conjurus*."

They spent the class dredging up from the hindmost regions of their brains all the complex information of multifarious theories that had haunted them the previous year as examinable material. This took up so much of their class, because of the sheer volume of what they had to recall, that there was very little time at the end of the lesson for McGonagall to add a few details to their existing notes, and they certainly didn't get to attempt any new concepts.

"Since this is your first class, your homework is simply to study," she said at the end of the lesson. "Make certain you are crystal clear on the concepts we reviewed today, because we will be quickly cutting to the chase next class. Dismissed."

They hurried out of the room, and the majority of them found their seats in Charms ten minutes later.

Flitwick's class was similar to McGonagall's; mostly review and an introduction to the new concepts they would cover over the next two years. They did, however, get a chance to do some magic. As a way to begin one of their major units of study (enchanted objects in motion or already under enchantments), they started with the fairly simple and highly amusing task of using magic to carefully redirect the trajectory of things that were flying at them either by Banishing Charms or just someone's muscle power. This helped cheer Harry up, not least of all because he got to vent some aggression by chucking things like books, pillows and vases, all provided by Flitwick, at Ron and Hermione.

"Wow, Harry, good arm. Are you sure you don't want to play Chaser?"

After Charms, they separated. Ron went to History of Magic, grumbling about his misfortune at having to put up with Binns without Hermione to take notes for him.

"Don't worry," Harry reassured him. "If you do badly, you can drop it in seventh year."

Hermione shot Harry a reproving look as they left Ron and made their way out to Herbology.

"What?"

"That's not very encouraging, Harry," she told him sternly.

"Oh, come on, Hermione. You dropped History of Magic. You have to admit it's useless."

"But Ron *didn't* drop it, and if he's going to take a course, he should put effort into it."

"Sure. And he's gonna drop History of Magic soon, so why should he put effort into it?"

Hermione made a noise in her throat that sounded almost like a suppressed scream. "Sometimes I swear I can't even speak to you reasonably because you just get so careless and *reckless*, it's like you're—"

She cut herself off sharply, with an almost panicked look on her face, and Harry knew why; mentioning the word "reckless" could only lead to mentioning Sirius. Neither of them spoke again.

Herbology was yet another typical first day back, full of mostly old information and a summary of what they would be studying, with a few new details and elaborations. Because of this, they got away from it cleaner than they usually would do, and made good time on their way to their next class.

When they joined Ron again for Defence Against the Dark Arts, he looked as though he had just woken up. Possibly he had. Harry couldn't help laughing slightly at the sight of him with his hair looking more characteristic of a Potter than a Weasley, as Hermione tutted.

"That was the longest class I've ever sat through," Ron groaned, rubbing his face. "Is it Christmas yet?"

"Not quite," Hermione told him dryly.

"Yeah, we've got Defence Against the Dark Arts first," Harry said. "With Tonks, remember?"

"Ooh, I'm interested to see what kind of teacher she is," Hermione said, forgetting, or choosing to temporarily let go of, Ron's indiscretion of laziness at the prospect of facing a new teacher and an old friend.

Their curiosity was addressed almost immediately. When they walked into the room, a young woman was standing there with short, blonde hair that framed her face, startlingly blue eyes and a petite, button-like nose that Harry had seen her put on as one of several to amuse Hermione and Ginny over dinner at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. She smiled at the students as they entered, but only Harry, Ron and Hermione returned her friendly wave. The others exchanged puzzled looks, and Harry knew they were wondering what had happened to the teacher they had seen at the start of term feast. They looked apprehensive as they found their seats.

"Good afternoon, class," Tonks said brightly when they had fallen expectantly silent. "My name is Professor Tonks, as Dumbledore—Professor Dumbledore, I mean—told you last night. And to answer the question I know you all want to ask..."

She scrunched up her face as though thinking hard, and transformed into the brunette she had been the day before. The class jumped and gasped.

"Cool!" breathed Dean Thomas, as Seamus next to him stared in awe. Tonks beamed before returning to her blonde self.

"I'm a Metamorphmagus," she explained, "meaning that I have the ability to change my appearance at will. I'm also an Auror. Any other questions about me?"

There was an impressed silence as she smiled around at them all.

"No? Well, then, let's get started. Dumbledore tells me you covered curses fairly well in your fourth year, and Remus tells me... Sorry, I mean Professor Lupin—"

"Do you know him?" blurted Parvati. "He was our best teacher!"

Tonks looked slightly surprised. "Yes, I know Remus. I'll say hello to him from you all, if you like. Anyway, he tells me that you made good progress with dark creatures in your third year. This year, we'll be expanding on both of those areas as well as learning some quite challenging spells that I find myself using often in my profession."

Neville raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr...Longbottom, is it? I believe we met last year, briefly."

"Er...yes," Neville said. "I was just going to say, if you want to know what spells and stuff we can do, you should ask Harry."

Harry grinned sheepishly as most of the class laughed; last year, they had formed a secret organization called Dumbledore's Army. Led by Harry, it was a place where they could learn the defensive spells they weren't getting from their useless Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Harry wasn't sure if Tonks knew about it or not.

Beaming at Harry, she said proudly, "Yes, I heard all about the DA. This class will be expanding on many of the lessons my young predecessor here gave you. I understand he was quite a good teacher."

Harry smiled even wider, trying not to look too pleased with himself.

"So let's get to it," said Tonks, whipping out her wand. "The first lesson's gonna be a little bit boring because there's no magic. I'm going to put some notes on the blackboard here about curses Dark Wizards usually use and attack patterns they usually follow."

Although they didn't get to perform any spells, the class certainly wasn't bored by the notes. They had never heard about Dark Wizards from the perspective of a trained and experienced Auror before; the closest antecedent would have to be the impostor Professor Moody in their fourth year. Tonks also knew many of the students by name already, having heard about them from Harry, Ron, Hermione, Remus and Dumbledore, and could call upon them for firsthand accounts.

"The Vertigo Curse is useful to Dark Wizards because they often rely on confusing opponents. Seamus, Dumbledore tells me you used this one on a fellow classmate last year, am I right?"

Looking embarrassed and proud, Seamus said, "Yeah. Some Slytherin kid was insulting the Gryffindor Quidditch team, so I let him have it."

"Would you like to tell us about it?"

Seamus explained the Vertigo Curse, Ron explained a Slug-Vomiting Curse he had experienced in second year, and Parvati explained the Reductor Curse she had a knack for. The students clearly were thoroughly enjoying reliving their favourite spells, but with half an hour left in class, Tonks called them to order.

"I'd like to be serious now," she said. "We need to address some more dangerous and harmful spells, and it will be difficult for your classmates to relive some of these. Trust me, when you've been subjected to a real, serious dark curse, it's not something you want to joke about. They are unpleasant memories for all involved."

She paused to look around at them all solemnly for effect.

"Let's start with Ron," she then began calmly, "who can tell us about the effects of the Mensfaclus Jinx."

Ron looked surprised. "The what?"

"*Mensfaclus*," Tonks repeated. "Do you remember ever having that incantation said to you?"

For a moment, Ron continued to look bewildered; then realization crossed his face; then he glowered darkly at what he had just recollected.

Ron told them all about the curse that had reduced his mental level to that of an infant, making him laugh at anything and making him unable to understand the consequences of his actions. After this, Hermione quietly told the story of the Cardiac Stasis Hex that had nearly killed her. It was surprising to learn how many others in their

class had been exposed to such violent and dangerous spells in their pasts. Harry knew his experiences, numerous as they were, would be the grand finale.

"Thank you, Lavender," said Tonks gravely, when she had finished the tale of the Debilitosis Curse that had cost her grandfather the use of his legs. "Finally... I know you've learned about the Cruciatus Curse, but you haven't heard what it's like to experience it. This is one of those things that everyone should have to face, or more accurately, to be able to put a human face to. So, Harry, if you could...?" she asked kindly.

"Okay," he said resignedly, feeling the eyes of the class upon him. "What do you want to know?"

There was a brief pause before anyone dared to speak.

"When have you had it put on you?" asked Parvati in a quiet voice.

"Last June," Harry answered. "In the graveyard with Voldemort, just after he came back. He did it to me a few times. And he did it again, in the Department of Mysteries at the end of last term."

The class stared. Harry was uncomfortably aware of Neville's gaze, fixed downward at his desk.

"What...what does it feel like?" asked Seamus nervously.

Harry didn't want to answer truthfully in front of Neville, but he didn't want to give a sugar-coated answer, either. He looked at Tonks and saw that she was eyeing Neville, too.

"I want you all to understand," she said, looking them all over, "that these topics are very difficult for people in this class. I cannot emphasize that point enough. Everyone must be perfectly comfortable at all times in this room to say, feel or think whatever they like, without fear of being judged or insulted, if we are going to learn anything. You *will not* form opinions of anyone based on their actions or emotions within these four walls. Ever. Am I understood?"

Tonks could be foreboding when she tried, surprisingly so, in fact, given how perky and fun she usually was, but they were all so sobered by the conversation thus far that there was really no need for her to give them any warnings. They nodded their consent, and Neville managed to look up from his desk. Harry continued, though it was without meeting his eye.

"It felt like...every nerve in my body was on fire. I couldn't move or do anything to stop it, and I couldn't stop screaming, and I could barely think."

"What were you thinking?" asked Lavender. They were all speaking in hushed tones, except Harry.

"I couldn't think about anything, except how much it hurt, and...how scared I was." He truly hated ever having to admit fear, but it was best that they all know.

A long silence followed this before Hermione asked, "Was it the worst pain you've ever felt?"

Harry looked at her, then across the rest of the class. He knew the answer to that. It was obvious...

"No," he said.

The silence positively quivered. Harry could tell that even Tonks was listening. He continued in a carefully even voice. If he could just keep his words under control, he could keep from breaking down.

"A few months ago, Voldemort possessed me. That was more painful... I felt as though I was about to...I don't even know. But that pain was the worst." Most likely it had been augmented by his fresh emotional wounds at the loss of Sirius, he thought dully. Opting not to think about this, he told them, "I remember wanting to die so it would stop. I remember wishing Dumbledore would kill me... because death would be better..."

As he said this, Harry felt a brief surge of pain shoot through his scar. He didn't much care.

"Well," said Tonks finally, in a crisp tone, "I think we should end here. It's good to finish on a note that will make you think. You can go a bit early, then."

The class exited in silence, but Harry hung back to speak to Tonks. He wasn't sure if he wanted to thank her for giving him a chance to share, or ask her not to make him go through those things again. He considered these options as she erased the blackboard before turning towards the now empty classroom to gather the mess of supplies strewn over her desk.

"Oh. Yes, Harry?" she asked when she noticed him.

He opened his mouth to speak. Then he closed it.

"Nothing. See you."

Chapter Three—Mysteries of History

Hermione was not the only one reading by the common room fire that evening. Ron had borrowed a book called *A Magical History of the Twentieth Century* from the library and was trying to catch up on what he hadn't been able to listen to in class. Ginny had joined them, as well; she was in her fifth year, and already irritable about the amount of homework she had been set. As she wrote, she was muttering about the various teachers and how horrible they were being. And Harry, of course, was engrossed in *The History of Hyrule*.

He had read the introduction, which was shorter and less dry the second time, possibly because he was more awake, and was just finishing "Chapter One: The Creation". It was an interesting story about how the planet and all life on it had been formed by three deities: Din, goddess of power; Farore, goddess of courage; and Nayru, goddess of wisdom. Harry was just imagining what it would be like in a society that worshipped Them when he remembered what Dumbledore had told him. Everything in this book was true. When he recalled this, he actually made a small exclamation of surprise. Ron looked up.

"What?"

"Oh... It's just an interesting book, that's all."

Hermione, who had broken her focus on *Herbs of Africa*, became absorbed again, and Ginny hadn't so much as paused in her low, rapid fuming. As Harry turned to begin "Chapter Two: Holy Relics and Temples," Ron asked in an exasperated tone, "Don't you have *any* work to do, or are you just going to relax all night?"

"This is work!" Harry said indignantly.

"You really should start on those Charms review questions or your Herbology diagrams," Hermione said without looking up. She was now carefully copying an illustration of a Deku Baba onto her parchment to label its parts; they had to do such pictures for six different plants. Harry looked briefly at her work, considering it. She was probably right.

"Yeah, I'll do the Charms stuff," he sighed, picking up his backpack. "That shouldn't take too long."

"I've never seen you actually *wanting* to read," Hermione commented, still working without pause.

It was unusual, Harry knew, for him to be interested in a history textbook, but this one was interesting. It read like a story, and he could tell he hadn't even gotten to the good part yet. He was also curious about those two pictures of Ganondorf and Link. Who were they? Why did they hate each other? Would there be other pictures in this book of people that he had seen in his dreams? Why did he have these dreams at all?

They worked in silence for at least another hour. Ron closed his book with a sigh of relief as he took his last note at around eight thirty, then picked up his Charms questions. Moments later, Hermione put down her last Herbology diagram, a Flying Bean sprout, and picked up her own Charms work just as Harry finished his. Ginny was scribbling a conclusion to her paper for Snape; as she wrote her last words, she declared, "That ought to keep the old idiot happy. I need a break." Shoving her books and paper into her bag, she left the fireside to join some of her fellow fifth-years in a game of Gobstones. Ron watched her go.

"She'll regret not staying on top of her work," he said darkly.

"She's doing better than her friends," Harry pointed out.

"And it's not as if you have any right to criticize!" Hermione snorted. "As I recall, you didn't do any homework your first week of fifth year!"

"Yeah...well, I was training for Quidditch," Ron muttered, avoiding her gaze. He turned to Harry and pounced on the change of subject. "Speaking of which, Harry, we need two new Chasers this year. Have you done anything about tryouts?"

"Oh, not yet. I'll talk to Madam Hooch tomorrow booking the pitch. I'll put a sign up, too..."

Harry pulled out a scrap piece of parchment and scribbled on it, "*New Chasers needed for Gryffindor Quidditch team. Tryouts soon.*"

Hermione, reading over his shoulder as she passed behind him on her way to return *Herbs of Africa* to her dormitory, snorted. "Oh, Harry, please. Let me."

She took the parchment from it and deleted the words with a tap of her wand. In their place, she wrote in careful, curly letters:

Notice from

Gryffindor Quidditch captain

Harry Potter

Are you skilled on a broomstick?

Do you want to help our team beat Slytherin for the Quidditch championship the third straight year?

Gryffindor needs you!

Two of our best Chasers have graduated, and we need new players to follow in their footsteps!

Keep watching the notice board for more information on how you can become Gryffindor's new star!

Everyone is encouraged to try out!

"You see?" Hermione said, showing Harry her sign. "Now that attracts attention and interest!"

And she proudly strode across the room to pin up the sign, where several people immediately turned their heads towards it and proved Hermione right.

"You could use her," Ron said with a smirk. "For PR and organization and stuff like that."

Harry and Hermione both looked at Ron, then each other.

"Want to?" Harry asked.

"Sure," Hermione answered.

"Hey— I wasn't serious!" Ron said.

"No, but it was a good idea," Hermione told him with a shrug, as she picked up her Charms again and set off working.

That night, Harry had his most convoluted dream to date. Or it might have been two dreams. He still wasn't sure.

First, he just saw darkness for several minutes, but he somehow knew it was not simply the darkness of his closed eyes. Then, gradually, a dream began. He saw Voldemort's face, the only pale thing in a dim room lit by a fire. Voldemort was walking across the room to open the door; when he did, a short and rather thickly built man hastened to bow.

"Yes, Nott, I have been expecting you... Enter. You have news?"

"I do, my Lord," panted Nott, still stooped in a half-bow as he shuffled into the dim room. "I have worked tirelessly on the task you assigned me, and I am delighted to say that I have at last—"

"Spare me your elaborations," hissed Voldemort. "Tell me, have you found him?"

"I—Well, yes, we have found...in a manner of speaking... You realize, of course, that he is not *alive*, in the conventional sense, and waiting to be found...b-but nonetheless, we have located what remains of him on this, er, plane on existence."

"And where is he?" Voldemort demanded.

"He—that is, the evidence of him—"

"You are far too rambling, Nott," said Voldemort in a dangerously quiet voice. "You underestimate what I can comprehend, and you therefore give me unnecessary buffering details."

Looking shocked, Nott stammered, "No, my Lord, never! I—"

"Do not contradict me. Give me a location."

"Yes...yes..." Nott muttered, continuing to look flustered as he fumbled in his robes for something. He pulled out a piece of parchment and handed it to Voldemort, explaining, "Off the coast of Ireland. In the southeast... that is, west of here..."

"I am familiar with the geography of Great Britain and Ireland," Voldemort cut him off, taking the parchment. "It is marked on this map?"

"Yes, my Lord. Or, as near as I could calculate. It is a very precise thing to document..."

"You may go, Nott," Voldemort told him, "and have Lucius sent to me."

Continuing to bow awkwardly as he backed out of the room, Nott babbled on, "Yes, my Lord... of course... I will."

Voldemort opened the map as Nott quietly closed the door behind him. It showed Ireland, and just as Nott had said, a place off the southeastern coast was marked with a small red X and its coordinates. As Voldemort gave a low chuckle of satisfaction, the scene began to fade away. Yet it had only just begun to do so before all was suddenly darkness again.

But it wasn't the darkness of dreamless sleep. It was the darkness of a person lying awake in a room in a house in a town completely unpolluted by artificial light. Gradually, the person's eyes adjusted, and some features of the room became visible: a small wooden table, a small wooden desk. Everything in the room was wooden, including the floor, ceiling and walls. Actually, there was only one wall, because the room was a circle. Harry had a funny feeling this was a tree house; he also suspected it was Link's house.

Harry sat up, or rather, the person as whom he was dreaming sat up; to judge by the body this point of view was attached to, he was younger than Harry himself, ten or eleven years old at the most. He

was sleeping in his clothes, which consisted of a green tunic and leather belt. A matching hat lay on the floor next to the bed, where he had tossed it before falling asleep.

Link yawned, rubbed his eyes, and ruffled his hair before standing up and stretching. He grabbed his hat and shoved it on as he padded on bare feet to the open door, where a pair of brown leather boots stood. After slipping them on, Link went out into the warm night.

His house was in the top of a tree, and he climbed down a ladder to reach the ground. Harry saw that he was in the middle of a forest, or, more accurately, in the middle of a small town in the forest. All the houses were, like Link's, carved into trees, but they looked as though they had grown organically into the trunks and branches rather than having been imposed upon them. Pollens drifted slowly through the air, some of them glittering mystically. This place was more attuned to nature than any Harry had ever seen.

Link was making his way to the edge of the forest settlement, where thick vines grew over a high ledge of rock. With the grace of a cat, Link climbed the wall and reached a large, hollow trunk which formed a sort of entrance into what was otherwise a solid wall of greenery. The trees on the other side were just as thick, and though they thinned in some areas, they still looked like random and labyrinthine confusion to Harry. Yet Link navigated the woodland as easily as if he were following clear paths. He was taking a winding route with few variations in appearance—a rock here, a forest pool there... The whole place was disorienting in the extreme, but Link clearly knew it well. He was unfazed to find himself in a large clearing that marked the beginning of a hedge maze; this, like everything else in Link's world, had apparently occurred naturally. And, like everything else, Link knew it like the back of his hand and wove his way through easily.

On the other side of the maze was the strangest thing yet. It was another clearing, but this one was at the top of a flight of stairs, and the first thing Harry noticed was a large stone slab on the forest floor, carved with a simple design. The second thing was a doorway, which sat atop an overgrown wall like the one Link had climbed to enter this place. A stairway had once led up to this structure, but it had long

crumbled away, and all that remained now was a stone pillar and a few half-intact stairs high overhead, near the door itself. Link crossed the clearing towards this structure, looking into its black depths.

"Hi, Link. I kind of thought I'd see you here tonight."

The voice shocked Harry instantly, not only because he hadn't noticed there was another person in the clearing, but also because that person was speaking in a language he had never heard before and yet could somehow understand.

"Hi, Saria," answered Link in the same language; he was not startled by the presence of another person. He was looking at a tree stump now, and Harry saw that a young girl was seated on it. She had blended in with the moss, leaves and ivy behind her, because her boots, shorts, sweater, eyes and even hair were all green. Link sat on the ground before her, legs sprawled in front of him as he leaned back on his elbows.

"You were having nightmares, weren't you?" asked Saria quietly. Link sighed and looked up at the stars in the clear night sky.

"One of the weird ones... You know, with the man who speaks a different language."

There was a long pause, during which a few notes of flute-like music quivered through the air. Link looked down; Saria had brought a roundish, tan-coloured instrument to her lips and was playing on it a quiet, slow song.

"What were you having nightmares about?" asked Link.

The music stopped abruptly.

"Same as always," Saria mumbled in answer, staring down at the instrument in her hands. "The dark man... but this time it was worse."

"Why?" asked Link nervously.

"I saw him here," Saria said softly, looking around the clearing.

Now it was Link who was shocked. "Here? But he couldn't come here, he's not a Kokiri!"

"I know it doesn't make any sense. But none of our nightmares ever really do, do they?"

Link laughed bitterly. "That's sure true. Do you think that means they won't come true then?" He sounded hopeful.

"No... I still think they will," she said sadly. "I just have a feeling..."

There was another protracted pause, during which Saria put the instrument to her lips again. Before she could start playing, Link said, "I'm surprised you came here. I would think you'd be a little bit scared."

Smiling shrewdly, Saria eyed Link and asked, "Would you be *a little bit scared* to come here?"

"No," Link answered quickly, sitting up straighter. "I just thought you might be."

Saria laughed, explaining, "I had to make sure everything was okay here. This place is important to me."

"Yeah... me, too. I'm glad nothing's wrong."

"So am I. I think we need to get cheered up a bit, don't you?"

Link grinned. "How about some music, ocarina girl?"

Saria began to play an upbeat, childish tune, and Link began tapping his feet in time to it.

"How about some dancing, Link?" Saria suggested between notes.

"Come on, Saria, I'm no good."

Saria shrugged. "I've seen you dance."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Link demanded indignantly.

Grinning, Saria said, "Prove me wrong."

"I plan on it!" Link laughed, jumping to his feet. He began to turn and jump around playfully, with no sense of rhythm, and Saria had soon dropped her ocarina to join him. They grabbed hands and spun around in a circle, until they were both so dizzy that they collapsed in a heap on the grass in exhaustion. The sky had begun to lighten by the time they stopped giggling and lay still on their backs, staring at the sky.

"We're always going to have fun, aren't we?" said Link.

Saria didn't answer.

"Saria?"

He looked over; she was dozing off.

"We'll be best friends forever, Link... no matter what..." she murmured softly, her eyes fluttering closed.

They lay there, content with the moment that felt as though it would never end, and discontent with the uncertain future they knew was coming all too soon.

Harry woke up confused; that one dream—or was it two?—had taken up his entire night's sleep. But that wasn't nearly as strange as the fact that Link had apparently dreamed about Voldemort. It was one of many things that left Harry utterly lost.

Did all this mean that Link was a Seer, and made prophecies about occurrences thousands of years in the future? Or did it mean that Harry had simply constructed a dream out of random pieces of information in his brain? If that was the case, they did any of the places he had seen exist? Did Saria, Link's best friend, exist? And what about the fact that they were speaking a different language? Was that the second tongue that *The History of Hyrule* was written in?

"We're going to be late, Harry, let's go!" came Hermione's voice, breaking into Harry's thoughts. He blinked, and snapped himself into the present.

"Oh...right," he said vaguely, piling his books into his bag. He had been sitting in the library with Ron and Hermione during a long break between classes, but now it was time for them to go to Astronomy.

"You look tired," Ron observed, frowning. "Are you still not sleeping or something?"

"No. I'm sleeping okay. Just...thinking."

"About that book?" asked Ron and Hermione in unison.

"About a dream I had last night."

"A nightmare?" Hermione asked fearfully.

"Not really... It'll take too long to explain now, I'll tell you later."

He continued to formulate theories about various parts of the dream right through Astronomy. For example, Link had said that only Kokiri could go to the place where he and Saria were; according to the book, the Kokiri were a race of people who lived their entire lives within the south eastern regions of Hyrule, which were called Kokiri Forest and the Lost Woods, and were children of about ten years old developmentally from the moment they came into existence (grown like plants rather than born like babies) until they died. So all this information tallied, since presumably Link and Saria had been in Kokiri Forest somewhere.

But each answer like this led to more questions. For example, if he was a Kokiri, why were there pictures of Link as a fully grown man? And why did Harry often dream of him doing things outside the forest? And, most importantly, how could Link have descendants?

Harry also wondered why Saria was such a minor part of Harry's dreams if she was such a major part of Link's life. Perhaps Ganondorf had done something to her. If that were the case, it would explain Link's murderous rage against the man; Harry knew that it was very

easy to wish for someone to suffer if they had hurt someone you loved.

"Harry...*Harry!*"

"Huh?"

Ron chuckled, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"You really have to start paying attention to the real world, Harry," she scolded him.

"I am paying attention," Harry said defensively. "I just haven't been sleeping well—"

"Oh, honestly, Harry," she snapped impatiently, "you said just before the class that you had been sleeping fine!"

"Did I? Well, maybe a little..."

Ron raised his eyebrows at Hermione. "He's not even making sense to me now."

Harry knew he was barely coherent; his mind was elsewhere. "Look, I just... Let's just go work on some homework...we don't have another class, do we?"

Hermione looked as if she wanted to lecture him again, possibly for not knowing his own schedule, but Ron headed her off by saying, "No, we don't. Want to go up to the library or the common room?"

"The library's closer to the Great Hall, and it's almost dinner time. We should be able to get our Astronomy mostly done before then, shouldn't we?"

"Do you even know what the Astronomy homework is, Harry?" Hermione asked suspiciously. Harry, who had copied down the assignment without really reading it, showed her what he had scrawled at the bottom of his notes, about an essay on spiral galaxies.

"Told you I'm paying attention," Harry said, trying to sound hurt by her unjustified accusation as he put his notes away again.

They worked in the library, as planned, until dinner, then made their way down to the Great Hall together. Once they were seated, Harry pulled out *The History of Hyrule* to read as he ate, and Ron laughed out loud through a mouthful of steak.

"Are you trying to outdo Hermione?" he asked after he had swallowed.

Hermione glowered at them both, and said sanctimoniously, "I don't consider that an insult."

Harry shrugged. "It's getting good," he answered Ron's question by way of explanation. He was halfway through "Chapter Two: Holy Relics and Temples," and he planned to finish it by the end of dinner. The next chapter was called "The Early Wars," but Dumbledore's list instructed him to skip to "Chapter Seven: The Quest of the Hero of Time," and he was planning on it. According to his picture caption, Link was the Hero of Time, and he was what Harry was most interested to read about.

Just to satiate his curiosity slightly, he flipped ahead to the beginning of chapter seven to look again at Link and Ganondorf's pictures. Before he reached them, however, he paused on the page just before, which was taken up with portraits of other characters who would presumably come into play. One of them instantly caught Harry's attention.

She was a young girl dressed all in green; she even had green eyes and green hair that framed her smiling face and long, pointed ears that matched Link's. She was also holding a roundish object which Harry recognized from his dream as a musical instrument. An ocarina. Around her head fluttered a pale green sparkle with wings. It looked like a fairy, and thinking back, Harry realized that it had been present in the dream, too. He simply hadn't paid it any mind, because Link hadn't. This picture was labelled, *Saria I (7214-7008 BCE) – Sage of Forest*.

It was the dates that sent Harry reeling. She was seventeen years older than Link! Of course, he reminded himself, Kokiri didn't age, so

that wouldn't matter...but Link aged. That fact still bothered him. Besides that, Link had lived about seventy years, and while this seemed like a respectable life span to Harry, Saria had lived for over two hundred! Why were they so different? Had Link perhaps died in battle, at a young age by Kokiri standards?

There were other pictures as well. A gruff-looking man who greatly resembled a large, brown rock with arms, legs, a beard, and powerful muscles. *Darunia (7221-7011 BCE) – Sage of Fire. (7202-7180 BCE) – Big Brother of the Gorons.* So this person, like Saria, had lived roughly two hundred years...

A woman who resembled a blue fish with shimmering skin and large sapphire drop earrings, standing on two webbed feet and smiling sweetly as the sparkling fins on her arms fluttered slowly. *Princess Ruto Zora (7198-7007 BCE) – Sage of Water.* So she was Link's age, but had vastly outlived him...

Another woman, who looked as though she belonged to the same race as Ganondorf, with bronze skin, a large gem set in her forehead, and a long ponytail of hair so flaming red that it put Ron to shame; she also had the same sharply defined nose and normal-sized ears that Link's rival did, and dressed in the same manner that looked Arab-inspired in colour and style, but while Ganondorf's clothes were clearly fit for warfare, hers were intended primarily to keep cool in hot regions. *Nabooru (7212-7008 BCE) – Sage of Spirit. (7194-7180 BCE) – Queen of the Gerudo.* She, too, had lived a long time, but she had reigned as queen for only fourteen years, very early in her life, and, unless Harry was mistaken, at more or less the same time Ganondorf had...

The last woman, rather intimidating in appearance, with steel grey hair pulled back fiercely behind those distinctly pointed ears, her face decorated in what looked like war paint around the eyes, which suited her stern expression; she was dressed in sleek battle attire, complete with some sort of rod in her hand that might have been used to discipline a horse, or for some other purpose. *Lady Impa (7236-7025 BCE) – Sage of Shadow.* She had been born before any of the others...

Finally, an elderly man of a short, thick build, dressed in rich, red robes, the sleeves of which hung past his hands, and though he was almost completely bald, except for a circle of white hair, he had a short beard of the same colour; his ears, too, were pointed, his blue eyes were vibrant and piercing, and he was clearly not a man to be toyed with. *Rauru (7254-7159 BCE) – Sage of Light*. He had lived most of his life before any of the others were even born...

On the opposite page were two pictures of children. The first could only be Link: he had the same clothes and eyes of his older incarnation, he was armed with a small sword and wooden shield, and his face was already hardened by fighting. As Harry looked at him, a blue sparkle like that which glittered around Saria flew out of his hat. It was, of course, another fairy, but Harry was sure it hadn't been in his dream.

Sir Link / Hero (7197-7123 BCE) – Hero of Time.

Yet in this picture, he was just a child. He couldn't have been much more than ten years old...

Next to him stood a girl of about the same age, wearing an elaborately decorated white and purple dress that suggested great wealth. She was adorned with golden jewellery, but had the same serious expression that Link wore. It seemed that she, too, had known suffering in her short life... And, Harry noticed abruptly, she was wearing a crown atop the golden hair which flowed down her back. It was the same shade as Link's, he noticed. So were her eyes. In fact, they looked very much alike, now that he thought about it. How odd.

Queen Zelda / Hyrule (7197-7123 BCE) – Seventh Sage. (7180-7123 BCE) – Queen of Hyrule.

This small girl would grow up to be a queen who would reign for fifty years—but she, like Link, would die at a comparatively young age...

No, wait. She *had* died at a young age already, hundreds of years ago. Dumbledore had said this was all true.

"Is something wrong, Harry?" came Ron's voice. "You're not eating. Hey, mate, what's up?"

For Harry had just looked up, his face blank with bewilderment.

"I...just...I'm trying to figure out these pictures... I'll look at it later."

He closed the book firmly, not wanted to look into the faces of the children on page 111; he didn't want to think about their mysteriously painful futures, so far in the past.

Chapter Four—Truth of Family

Two weeks later, Harry was thoroughly well-versed in Hylian society, religion, and history; Hermione was in the process of reading the book from cover to cover, and was currently on "Chapter Twenty-five: Earth;" and Ron had learned all the interesting and relevant information from Harry, with details added courtesy of Hermione. All three of them were quite keen to know why Dumbledore had given Harry the book to begin with. But, of course, Harry couldn't ask until he was ready to return it, and Hermione would kill him if he tried to do so before she was finished with it. Besides, it helped to have someone like her thinking over this information; they got into heated debates over historical details (which always made Harry feel like a complete nerd and bookworm), and had compiled a list of questions they would have to ask Dumbledore. It was usually Hermione who came up with the most interesting ones.

All of Harry's earlier questions, about the pictures, had been answered, and he felt much better about them. He learned that Link was not a Kokiri after all, but a Hylian orphan whose mother, wounded and dying, had left him to grow up in the forest. Saria had raised him, though he didn't realize it at the time and simply considered her a friend.

Harry also learned that Link and Zelda's life spans were normal in length; the reason the other figures had so outlived them was that they were Sages, divine beings with extremely potent magical powers, who weren't very susceptible to disease, injuries, or even the aging process.

However, Zelda, too, was a Sage, and so this would have led Harry to question why she had died so young...except that the book informed him that neither she nor Link ever had, in the conventional sense of the word, died. When they were both 74 years old, they had made the decision to be magically suspended in time, in a dimension between Hyrule and the world of the goddesses, by the Sages. They had anticipated that they might be needed centuries later, and the reason for this was the most interesting story of all.

King Ganondorf Dragmire had been sealed in time as well, by Link and Zelda themselves, when they were teenagers. He had taken over Hyrule by stealing for himself the power of the goddesses, and only the Hero of Time and the Princess of Hyrule had been able to stop him, for they, too, held the divine power. It came in the form of the Triforce, those triangles that Harry had seen on the first page. Ganondorf had attempted to steal it, but by so doing, had accidentally fulfilled a prophecy which caused it to split into three parts. Ganon retained the Triforce of Power, while Zelda obtained the Triforce of Wisdom, and Link, the Triforce of Courage.

As long as Ganon did not have the full Triforce, he could never take complete control of the divine and mortal worlds; but as long as he had the Triforce of Power, and as long as there was no one to take it from him, he could never fully be defeated. For this reason, Link and Zelda had never managed to kill him, only to seal him away.

Three times, across centuries, he had broken out of the seal. At these times, Link and Zelda had been reincarnated to fight him. They always had different bodies, usually those of their descendants, along with different personalities and no memories of their previous selves, but they always had the same spirits, and the same destiny to hold the Triforce pieces. At least once, they and the rest of the world had thought they had really killed Ganondorf, but this was not the case. It never could be.

All this fascinated Harry immensely, and that wasn't even considering the other elements of the legend: tales of musical instruments and songs that could control time itself, journeys between universes and dimensions, and much more. One artefact which particularly caught Harry's attention was the legendary Master Sword, which only Link could wield by pulling from its pedestal.

"It sounds like King Arthur," Hermione had commented when she read that part of the story. "You know, pulling Excalibur out of the stone and becoming king?"

Having grown up with the Dursleys, Harry was not exactly knowledgeable about mythology from any culture.

"Er...yeah," he said evasively.

In actuality, he rather thought Link reminded him of someone else. An orphan, growing up in a world he didn't know he didn't belong to, never fitting in, learning he was special, but not knowing for several years that he was fated to fight an epic battle against the greatest evil the world had ever known, an evil which had already begun to spread over the world like a plague, killing and destroying...an evil that only he could purge forever...an evil that he had to purge, if the sacrifice his mother had made, to die so that her baby son could live, would not have been in vain.

And then there was that legendary blade, evil's bane, the Master Sword, that only the True Hero could draw from its secret hiding place and use to conquer dark forces...

"Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that out of the hat," Dumbledore had said to Harry more than three years ago, when Harry had defeated Salazar Slytherin's monster with Godric Gryffindor's sword...

But no. Surely Harry was reading too much into mere coincidences.

As he often did when he was thinking, Harry was at the moment staring into the common room fire. Ideas played randomly through his mind as his quill hovered over his Potions essay in mid-sentence.

Potions. Yes. That was what he was supposed to be thinking about. He looked down at his parchment and tried to remember what he had been writing, although there was a part of him that didn't care. Snape made dark hints in each class that he had been forced to take Harry into the class against his better judgment, and Harry was beginning to wonder what Dumbledore was trying to accomplish by inflicting them upon each other when they had come so close to saying goodbye forever. That was another question he would have to ask when he returned *The History of Hyrule*.

Harry reread his last few words: *...to accomplish this, but may include...* He remembered that had been writing about which animals had body parts with magical properties that could be used in Delayed Memory Loss Potions. Yes. What was a Delayed Memory Loss Potion? He blinked. That, he had forgotten.

"Hermione, what do those things that we're studying do?" he asked.

"What things? Why subject?" She was reading; she turned the page without looking up, and Harry saw the heading of "Chapter Twenty-six: Human and Wizard Evolution."

"Potions."

"Oh, those memory ones... They make it so that the drinker will forget anything that happens to them in the hour after consumption, as soon as that hour is over."

"Right. Thanks."

Harry returned to his essay, but first he needed his copy of *Magical Properties of Magical Beasts*, so he began rummaging through his bag. He felt annoyed about something, but he didn't know what—

Then, abruptly, pain shot through his scar, and a wave of panic gripped his stomach as he sat straight up, throwing his head back and gripping the arms of his chair as if he were being consumed by some deadly force. He let out a short cry, trying to hold back a violent scream, and felt someone strike him across the face. The common room swam into focus when he opened his eyes, only realizing then that he had closed them, and he took in the sight of Ron standing over him.

"Did you hit me?" Harry asked. It was the first complete thought to come into his stunned mind.

"Yes," Ron told him, unabashed. "You-Know-Who was in your head, wasn't he?"

"How did you know?" Harry asked, shaking slightly as he rubbed his scar.

"I've seen it happen to you enough times," Ron told him grimly. "What was it this time?"

As he habitually did when Voldemort penetrated his mind, Harry answered the question instantly, though the words were not his own. They simply came out of his mouth, and he knew they were true.

"Someone did something he didn't want them to, and now he has to hurry on something he wanted to take his time to do properly. He's angry that he has to do it differently from how he wanted. It's like he's...panicking, almost."

Hermione had looked up from her book and was staring, white-faced, at Harry.

"I'm okay now," he assured her. "It happens, it's no big deal." He gave his forehead another rub with the back of his hand before pulling the book he needed for Potions out of his bag and turning to the index. Ron was still standing before him, and Hermione was still gripping her book tensely with her eyes on him. Neither of them seemed to believe that there was nothing to worry about and that he was simply returning to his homework.

"Tell Dumbledore," said Ron. "He'd want to know anything you can tell him."

"It's true, Harry," Hermione agreed, nodding.

"Well...yeah," Harry sighed reluctantly. "When I go to give the book back when you're done with it, I'll tell him then."

"I'll be done tomorrow," Hermione vowed, snapping her eyes firmly back onto the old, elaborate pages. Her eyes were darting back and forth as fast as he had ever seen them go.

"Well, okay, then," said Harry, a bit thrown. He exchanged a quick look with Ron, who simply gave a slightly lopsided shrug, before they both returned to their work.

"There."

With an impressive *wham*, Hermione dropped *The History of Hyrule* onto the table. Harry looked up at her, surprised.

"You finished it?" he asked.

It was an unnecessary question; her eyes were puffy with the obvious tiredness of a girl who had read her way through the night. She dropped into the seat on Harry's left at the house table in the Great Hall and began helping herself to scrambled eggs.

"Now you can take it back to Dumbledore and tell him about your scar last night," she said.

"Why are you so eager for me to do that?" Harry asked slowly. "It's not as if this is a new thing."

"No. But I just think that for Voldemort to be feeling something like panic... It's strange, isn't it?"

"I guess..."

"Then it is a new thing. And probably very significant. And we learned last year that...that when you don't talk to Dumbledore...and maintain communication with each other...bad things happen," she finished rather weakly.

There was too much truth in this to ignore. Harry nodded.

"We've got a while before Potions," he said, checking his watch. "I'll go now."

He picked up the large book and hurried out of the Great Hall; he didn't exactly know why he was hurrying, except that he wanted Dumbledore to know that for once he was doing what he was supposed to. Not like staying in the school when the world thought there was a murderer after him, not like preparing for the Triwizard tasks, not like Occlumency...

It was the last one which had proven to him the importance of not trying to take his own interpretation of instructions. He had been practicing it diligently this year, and thought he now it understood

fairly sturdily. On the other hand, his scar had burned again, and that wouldn't have happened if he had truly mastered the art of closing his mind.

Looking down, he found he had arrived at the stone gargoyle which marked the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

"Chocolate," he said. The gargoyle jumped aside instantly, and Harry stepped onto the newly revealed moving staircase. He heard quiet voices speaking as he reached the door, and wondered if they were the talking portraits or if Dumbledore had company. He knocked politely, just in case it was the latter.

"Come in," came Dumbledore's voice calmly, and Harry obeyed.

Dumbledore was writing something, but he looked up when one of the portraits said cheerfully, "Ah, the Potter boy is here to return your book!"

Nodding approvingly, Dumbledore asked, "You've finished it all, then?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, sitting in the chair opposite the Headmaster's so that he wouldn't have to hold the weight of the volume any longer.

"I hope it wasn't too dry for you. Tell me honestly, Harry, did it bore you?"

"No, sir," Harry replied, placing the tome heavily on the desk. "That is...I did have trouble starting it, but once I did, it was interesting."

"I'm very glad to hear that. You read it quickly, too, despite the time constraints of your homework and your role as Quidditch captain. I must tell you, Professor McGonagall and I hesitated to appoint you to the role, knowing as we did about the circumstances of your life. You're not finding it all too much?"

"No, sir. Hermione's helping me out with organizing and stuff."

Dumbledore smiled. "Miss Granger must be an invaluable friend when you have such needs."

Harry smiled, too. "I'll say."

"How much time do you have until your next class, Harry?" Dumbledore asked suddenly, lowering the quill with which he had been writing when Harry arrived.

"Oh...quite a bit. It's Potions." Harry mentioned this fact casually, but in the hope that Dumbledore would offer some explanation, and the Headmaster seemed to read his mind. He regarded Harry with his clear, blue eyes full of unfathomable wisdom.

"You must be wondering why you are continuing with Potions when you did not meet Professor Snape's rather high standards for his NEWT class," he observed calmly.

"Yeah, now that you mention it," Harry said, trying to sound casual. He knew, however, that Dumbledore could hear the edge in his voice. "Perhaps you guessed that I stepped in on your behalf? And perhaps you wondered further why I would force Professor Snape and yourself to endure each other's company any more than you have already had to?"

"Yes, I did, actually," Harry answered quickly, folding his arms, but not aggressively. It was more of a defensive posture. His and Snape's animosity had reached levels this year that were almost frightening, and Hermione often had to kick Harry under the desk to remind him to control himself.

"The reason is quite simple," Dumbledore said unperturbedly. "You both have lessons to learn from each other. You must learn to ally yourselves for the common good, since you are both essential parts of the battle against Voldemort. In addition, it is crucial that you personally learn to overcome your weaknesses rather than giving up on them...and you should learn to make potions as well," he added, with the trademark twinkle in his eye.

This made more sense than Harry cared to admit.

"And what does Snape have to learn from me?" he asked. "There's got to be more than just...being allies for a common good or whatever..."

Dumbledore paused before answering carefully, weighing his words as he spoke them.

"You know as much as—indeed, more than—you really ought to know about Professor Snape without his consent. I shall not, therefore, give you any more information. However, since this also concerns you, I shall say that Professor Snape must learn from you to overcome certain weaknesses of his own."

Harry would have wagered his Firebolt that one of those weakness was an utter inability to forgive ancient wrongs committed against him by James Potter, but didn't say so.

"Now, let us leave the present for the time being," Dumbledore said in a far more comfortable and less cautious voice, laying down his quill and leaning back in his chair. "We shall return to the past, thousands of years ago. Other than to know why I wanted you to read this book, do you have any questions?"

This was what Harry had been waiting for: answers. "A few," he said, trying to decide which to ask first. He chose the one that was simplest, and had sparked the most debate between himself and his friends. "Are Link I and Queen Zelda I related?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "What makes you ask that?"

Shrugging, Harry told him simply, "They look alike." He didn't feel like outlining the two different sides of the argument.

"I suppose they do, don't they? You're very observant, Harry. Yes, it's a little-known fact, but Link and Queen Zelda were full first cousins. Their mothers were sisters."

Despite the fact that Dumbledore had proven him right, Harry couldn't help being horrified; his jaw dropped.

"But they were married!" he exclaimed in horror. "If they were cousins, why...?"

"Ah, the book doesn't explain that aspect very well," Dumbledore chuckled. "Their marriage, if you will check the dates, was very brief."

It was an arranged political union, of which they both disapproved, and by all accounts, they behaved after marriage just as they had always done before. That is to say, more like friends or siblings than like husband and wife. Even though they didn't know the truth of their heritage, their marriage was a disaster from the start." Dumbledore paused to shake his head, his beard twitching, before he went on. "Matters of the heart are always so complicated. You see, Link was in love with another woman."

"Oh, yeah. He had a second wife after Queen Zelda, didn't he?" Harry asked, drawing from his memory.

"That's right. She was a rancher's daughter named Malon, and Link actually fathered her child while married to Queen Zelda."

Harry didn't know whether or not to laugh. "She must have been furious," he said in what he hoped was an objective tone, struggling to keep his face straight.

"Queen Zelda? Oh, by no means. Remember, she didn't love Link any more than he loved her. She knew about the situation from the beginning, and it never bothered her. In fact, she was just as thrilled as he was when they learned about their respective parentages and therefore obtained an annulment."

"And then Link married Malon," Harry said slowly, trying as he spoke to recall such details. He had paid more attention to the wars and epic conflicts than the romantic aspects. "And Queen Zelda married someone else."

"Link's half-brother, Chezdon, to be exact."

Harry's head spun; that hadn't been in the book. "Wouldn't he be her cousin, too?"

"At first glance, you would think so, but no. Link and Queen Zelda were connected through their mothers, but Link and Chezdon were connected by a common father."

After a moment's consideration, Harry understood this. "Oh," he said finally. "Weird."

"Rather, yes," Dumbledore agreed. "It becomes complicated because the population of the communities in Hyrule were so small that all the families, especially the noble ones, became interrelated."

Harry remembered Sirius saying something very similar to this about pure-blood wizard families, and though that topic itself wasn't depressing, it still caused him yet another dull stab of grief. He latched onto another question.

"Another thing I was trying to figure out... Nabooru and Ganondorf, they were on opposite sides, right?"

"They had completely different political and religious ideologies and alliances, yes," Dumbledore agreed with a nod.

"But then how is it that they were the king and queen of the Gerudo? At the same time? The book said that Ganondorf took the throne when he came of age and Nabooru was his second in command, but why did that happen? Did he overthrow her or something?"

"Ah. Well, if I explain to you a bit of Gerudo culture, perhaps you'll understand. This is covered in the book, but not in one of the areas I had you read."

Thinking now that he probably could have simply asked Hermione this one, Harry simply listened.

"The Gerudo were a population of people living in the western desert of Hyrule. They were all very highly skilled thieves and warriors—more skilled than Link, some say, though that is open to debate. They were also all women."

"What?" Harry blurted. "But...Ganondorf was one of them, wasn't he?"

"Allow me to finish. They were all women, with a single exception. Every one hundred years, a male Gerudo was born, and he became their king when he came of age. It's very ironic, considering that the Gerudo hated men utterly."

"So Ganondorf, being the lone male, was automatically entitled to be king. However, there was also a royal family, and Nabooru was the heir to that line. She took the throne when her mother, the preceding queen, died, because Ganondorf was only a child at the time. Then, when Ganondorf came of age, she couldn't simply be shunted off of the throne, so she remained queen, but he was the higher ranking authority.

"Nabooru was a strong woman," Dumbledore went on with a smile, "and a very good leader for her people. She was comfortable enough with her power to stand up to Ganondorf, whom she recognized as an evil man. And there wasn't much, if anything, that he could do about her."

"I like her," Harry said, smirking.

"So do I," Dumbledore agreed, a twinkle in his eyes. "Was there anything else that you were confused about?"

"No," Harry said slowly, thinking as he spoke to ensure this was the case. "There were some things I was kind of thinking about, though." It was true that there were a few things that had peaked his curiosity, inspired not only by the book.

"And what would those be?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well... Like, I wondered if Link was a Seer," Harry offered hesitantly. "Or any of them, really."

Furrowing his brow almost suspiciously, Dumbledore inquired, "Why do you ask?"

Harry didn't want to mention his dream, which he was quite sure was a severe breach of Occlumency. As long as he kept it in mind, it couldn't be much of a problem. "I was just interested."

Dumbledore was looking closely at Harry, and it was a moment before he answered.

"Such things would be difficult to prove, or to disprove, since so many ancient cultures kept inaccurate records of divination processes. It is

probable, though, that the Sages Saw, for two reasons. First of all, they were close enough to a divine state that they may have had flashes of such knowledge as the goddesses have. Second, we know that Queen Zelda was a Sage, and we also know that she was one of the most gifted Seers in history. However, that proves only that she was a Seer, no one else."

"So then we don't know if Link was?"

"Many believe he was, and if the gift is hereditary, as magic is, then it is quite probable. I have never seen any definitive proof to that effect, but that does not by any means mean that he wasn't. In short, no one knows. I'm sure you read about the many difficulties with researching Hyrule that have come up over the centuries."

Harry nodded with a smile. "Like Plato and the Atlantis thing," he commented.

According to *The History of Hyrule*, Plato had been the first human to discover evidence of the ancient kingdom of Hyrule, long submerged since the last incarnations of Link and Zelda. He had discovered a few fragments with Hylian writing on them, and one word came up more than any of the others. Plato had logically concluded that this was the name of the oddly advanced civilization, but hadn't realized that it was in fact something else entirely. Nor had he realized that he was reading it backwards. As centuries passed, the name changed, and what had once been "Adlez" turned into "Atlantis."

Dumbledore nodded as well. "Precisely."

Harry was unsatisfied with this explanation, but he knew he could expect no better.

The last question was the most difficult to explain properly. He looked at his hands as he mumbled, "Professor...er... Do you remember...when I was in second year, how we talked about...similarities? Between me and Tom Riddle?"

Looking up hopefully, he saw that Dumbledore was looking back at him, completely still, his blue eyes piercing.

"I do," he said, quickly and softly.

"Well...well, I was reading ...about Link. And I thought...I mean, I noticed..."

He trailed off, hoping Dumbledore would pick up the train of thought.

"I am impressed, Harry," the Headmaster said quietly. "You have brought up the very thing I intended to discuss with you."

Harry didn't quite know what to say. Was that confirmation of his suspicion? But then again, he didn't exactly know what his suspicion was in the first place.

"Let me explain it to you like this. The legends of Hyrule require two things of a True Hero: that they possess the ability to wield the Master Sword, and that they bear a close resemblance to the first Hero, the Hero of Time. As you read, there were three True Heroes since the time of Link I. They were all named Link as well, they all were left-handed, they all came from humble backgrounds, and there were other minor similarities as well. The first two were his descendants, and the last, while not a blood relative, bore a striking physical resemblance to him.

"However, this absence of a blood relationship was important. It proved that the winds of fate in the world were changing, the old ways becoming less important... And after sealing Ganon away beneath the waves, Link and Zelda IV left their own legacies behind as well."

"And Hyrule was destroyed," Harry finished, recalling the book. "The goddesses ensured that ancient Hyrule would remain beneath the waves forever, and a new civilization began."

"Yes," Dumbledore confirmed. "But what happened to Link and Zelda IV?"

Harry paused, thinking. "The book didn't really say, did it?"

"Only in passing. The historians of the time didn't think it was significant information, and that fact in itself proves that it was." Seeing Harry's blank confusion, he explained, "You see, Princess

Zelda IV gave up her Royal identity, as there was no longer a Hyrule for her to be queen of. She returned to the life she had lived before learning her own story, that of a pirate captain named Tetra. Link IV as well took to the seas, exploring the ocean and charting the new world the goddesses had created. While their predecessors had always remained close after defeating the evil, the last Link and Zelda lost touch entirely, with each other and their own true identities. The historical record of their lives ends at that point."

"Not completely," Harry spoke up. "There was the story about Noah's flood, the one in the Bible. It said in this book that the goddesses cleansed the world again, and Link was Noah."

"That is true," Dumbledore said. "At least, it appears to be. You can understand that the recording of an apocalypse would be poorly documented. For example, we have reason to believe that Noah was not the name Link took, but the name he gave his boat. Consider this, Harry. The name comes from two ancient Hylian words: '*notei*,' meaning lion, and '*ahkai*,' meaning red."

"Oh, right," Harry said instantly. "Like the boat he had before, when he was fighting Ganondorf. It was called the King of Red Lions, wasn't it?"

"Very good, Harry, yes. Link IV's nickname was the Red Lion," Dumbledore confirmed. "But now, to conclude the story... Since that time, thousands of years ago, there have been no True Heroes."

Harry knew this already, but he still felt deflated at hearing Dumbledore say it. Part of him, he suddenly realized, had expected the Headmaster to say that the record was wrong, and there had been dozens of True Heroes in the years since the second great flood, Noah's flood, had left behind the first humans, and a few survivors of the Hyrulian race who would become later witches and wizards. The news that *The History of Hyrule* was right struck Harry as counterproductive. If nothing else had happened, if everything had changed, then why did Harry have to learn about it?

"Do you know why there have been no Heroes?" Dumbledore inquired.

Harry drew a blank. "No."

"Think of it this way. In the past, why did Heroes come to Hyrule? When and why?"

"They came to reseal Ganon when he escaped... Oh, so they haven't come because he hasn't escaped."

"More than just that," Dumbledore corrected him. "They came whenever an evil force was trying to use the Triforce to control and destroy the world of the goddesses' creation. No one has touched the Triforce because it remains at the bottom of the uncharted depths of the ocean, in the spirits of Ganondorf, Link I and Queen Zelda I, who are suspended in time. It was a mistake to leave them that way, because none of them can rest eternally while the strength of the Triforce binds them together. Until their heirs can take the pieces of the holy relic from them, the great conflict, which has been alternately dormant and active for millennia, which now lies buried beneath the ocean, will never end."

Something struck Harry in a flash of realization.

"Off the southeastern coast of Ireland..." he whispered.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Dumbledore, frowning slightly.

Harry blinked; he hadn't realized he had spoken out loud. Now he would have to tell about the dream anyway.

"Professor Dumbledore, a few nights ago I had a...sort of a nightmare. About Voldemort. I've been practicing Occlumency, I swear, but it just—"

"I understand that you have not yet mastered the art, Harry," Dumbledore told him, clearly not finding this fact a problem. "But you know now the full consequences of these visions, so they are not as dangerous as they once were."

He gave a sigh, and Harry felt a brief glimmer of grief trembling at the edge of his consciousness, towards the empty place where Sirius had

been. He pushed it away forcefully, refusing to let it consume him as it was constantly trying to do.

"Please, continue," said Dumbledore, clearing his throat.

"Right. I dreamed that one of his Death Eaters—I think it was Nott—gave him a map of where to find...someone. A man, I think. And Nott said...off the southeastern coast of Ireland."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, and Harry could see that he was trying not to betray what he was thinking through the look on his face.

"But that's not even the weird part," he went on. "After that, I sort of woke up into a dream where I was Link. I mean, Link had woken up and *he* had just had a dream about Voldemort..."

He explained the rest of the dream, including the meeting with Saria, and how she had had a dream herself, about Ganondorf.

"And all this was before I even read the book," Harry finished.

"This is why you wondered if Link was a Seer, I imagine?" Dumbledore asked, looking impressed.

"Er...yes."

"Well, Harry, to judge by this evidence, I would say that it seems likely that he was. I should say, is. He did not ever really die, and nor did Saria. They simply moved on to the next stage of existence."

Harry was relieved at Dumbledore's mild reaction. He hadn't expected anger, of course, but perhaps concern. He decided to tell the rest of the story as well, as Ron and Hermione had instructed him.

"There's more," he said. "Last night I got another one of those flashes. You know, about Voldemort's mood. My scar hurt, and he was...panicking about something. Someone did something he didn't want them to, and now he has to hurry in his next plan."

Dumbledore didn't answer; he was apparently thinking, his fingers tented near his chin. "Thank you, Harry. I am always glad to hear

these things. New information is an invaluable gift, and you have unique resources which are quite inaccessible to me."

Harry didn't quite know what to say to this. "Er...you're welcome."

"However, there are also many things that you cannot learn simply through your innate gifts. *The History of Hyrule* taught you many of those things, but it does not continue the story very much beyond the demise of the ancient kingdom. I would like to bring you into the present, Harry, to offer you the connections that span those many centuries."

Now Harry could feel his anticipation building. There was something great coming now, he could tell.

"I have not yet really answered the question you asked me a few minutes ago, because there is a great deal of information that comes along with the answer. Let me be blunt: The many parallels between yourself and the Hero of Time are not a coincidence."

Something exploded in Harry's stomach. Something shouted out: I knew it! All he said aloud, however, was, "Why, then? Why do they exist?"

"The answer is a simple one, but important. Allow me to explain it fully."

He moved to the glass case behind his desk and opened it. Inside was a brightly shining sword with a ruby-encrusted hilt, and the words "Godric Gryffindor" engraved on the lower part of the blade. Harry knew that sword; he had used it in second year to kill a deadly Basilisk. Now Dumbledore handed it to him again, saying, "Do you see what is engraved below Gryffindor's name?"

Reading aloud, his breath having stopped in his chest, Harry said quietly, "*Notei Ahkai*."

"Red Lion," Dumbledore translated. "And on the other side of the blade?"

Harry turned the weapon over, anticipating what he would find—an image of the Triforce, and two lines written in the sharp, cryptic letters of ancient Hyrule.

"What does it say?" he asked, his mouth dry.

"It is difficult to translate," Dumbledore told him. "But, roughly, it says, '*Farore's courage and Hero's strength; Evil's bane and Time's vessel.*'"

"And...it's..." Harry's voice died.

"The Master Sword," Dumbledore finished quietly.

Harry couldn't think of what to say. He wasn't sure how much of this was going where he thought it was, but he knew it was a surprise...or he thought he knew it was. Maybe it wasn't really so unexpected.

"But I...this...Link..." he stammered.

"You are a descendant of Link I," Dumbledore said softly. "And, by continuing his bloodline and by so resembling him in your own life story, you have more than proven yourself worthy of becoming the next True Hero."

"But—if Ganon and Link are still sort of alive..."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very observant. I will come to that, but there is yet more to say. The name on the sword, the one with which you are familiar."

"Godric Gryffindor," Harry agreed. "Red Lion... Was he a True Hero, too? No, he couldn't have been."

"You're right, he couldn't have been, because Ganondorf never lived during his time, and Salazar Slytherin, while we may disagree with his beliefs, was not by nature evil. However, Gryffindor was also a descendant of Link's bloodline, and one of your ancestors."

"How could this be his sword? He wasn't a Hero, he couldn't use it!"

Dumbledore sat down again behind his desk before he spoke. "When first this sword was forged, it was sealed in a stone pedestal from which only the True Hero could retrieve it. This was the case until the era of change that followed Link III."

"Oh, yeah," Harry said slowly. "The book mentioned something about how he changed everything, him and Queen Zelda III. But it didn't say what they did..."

"Did you not notice? What did they do that none of their ancestors had?"

The answer to this was obvious. "They got married," Harry replied instantly. "But why would that matter?"

"Because it tilted the balance of history. It united the bloodlines of the Triforce of Courage and Wisdom, and upset destiny."

"How did it happen, then?" Harry asked. "I thought nothing could happen if it wasn't destined..."

Dumbledore was shaking his head even as Harry spoke. "You know destiny is never that simple. Your own destiny, the prophecy you learned only a few months ago, shows that such matters are sometimes open to interpretation and different possibilities. But let me explain this further: Why could the first Link and Queen Zelda not marry?"

"Because they were cousins."

"Which means?"

Harry couldn't devise an answer. He had no idea, so he simply shrugged.

"Which means that they were both nobles," Dumbledore finished his own sentence. "They were of a common bloodline, and their mothers were noblewomen. Yet it was the destiny of the True Heroes to never be of noble backgrounds, and so destiny caused him to leave the world into which he was born and live his life as an ordinary man. His descendants, too, were always common people."

"Until Link III broke the mould by marrying into royalty," Harry finished, beginning to understand.

"Precisely. The marriage defied destiny, and yet, in a strange way, also followed the patterns of destiny by bringing the bloodline of the True Heroes back to the noble family from which its first member had sprung, many generations before. The result was change."

"Change... Changes like the fact that anyone can use the Master Sword now?" Harry suggested, thinking back to what had started this conversation.

"Not exactly. It is true that Link IV, the Hero of Winds, was not in any way connected by blood to the previous Heroes, but he did have the traits of a True Hero nevertheless. After his time, anyone could hold the blade, though there remained the stipulation that only a True Hero could use it against evil. In the hands of any other, it would not possess the magical capability to defeat evil definitively. It would simply be a dull blade. So, to answer your question, while Godric Gryffindor did possess it, he never used it. He may have believed himself to be a True Hero, though. Look at this. *Accio*."

In a single movement, one of the many books that lined Dumbledore's walls flew down and fell open in the desk, facing Harry. There was a picture of a blond man with fathomless blue eyes, and the shadow of a beard across his chin.

"That's Link," Harry said, "only he looks older than he did in the other book. Maybe forty or so?" He looked up at the Headmaster for confirmation; Dumbledore simply nodded at the book, so Harry looked down again and read the caption.

Godric Gryffindor.

Harry's jaw dropped.

"Yes," said Dumbledore, a faint smile visible beneath his beard. "So you can see why, given historical precedent, Gryffindor would have retrieved the Master Sword from the ruins of Hyrule in anticipation that he might need it."

"Yeah..." breathed Harry, still staring. "I mean, that's just—just incredible."

After a moment, Dumbledore said, "There is yet more to say, if you're ready?"

Tearing his eyes away from the picture, Harry managed, "Right."

"I am sure you have guessed this, but... Of course you understand that if a True Hero has emerged, then of course he must have someone to fight."

"Voldemort," supplied Harry. The words were barely out of his mouth before he blurted, rather louder than he had intended, "Voldemort is related to Ganon?!"

"Precisely," Dumbledore agreed, a hint of a wistful sigh in his voice. "And there is also the fact that you are descended of not only Link, but also Queen Zelda."

This news struck him like a physical blow, though it seemed obvious as soon as Dumbledore said it. Of course; if Link III and Zelda III had married, then they were both his ancestors.

"The epic battle continues, Harry," Dumbledore was now saying. "You are the new generation."

Harry's head was spinning. The new world now depended on him to survive, just as the ancient kingdom of Hyrule had depended on Link.

"I'm sure you'd like some time with this information," Dumbledore said calmly, "and I'm sure your next class will be beginning soon. So, you of course know that you can always approach me with any questions you might have, but we'll leave our conversation here for today, shall we?"

"Yeah...yeah, okay." Harry knew from experience that when Dumbledore said a conversation was over, it was over. "But...just so that I know, is this information between you and me only?"

"What I have told you about Hyrule is not classified information, simply uncommon. You may tell your friends as much or as little of it as you choose. Perhaps Miss Granger would like to borrow my book?" he asked, a smile playing across his face as he waved towards *The History of Hyrule*.

Grinning sheepishly, Harry admitted, "She already did. I couldn't have kept her away if I tried."

"I would be lying if I said that surprises me," Dumbledore told him, "or if I said that I wasn't expecting such a thing before I gave the book to you. Did she read only the chapters you did, or the entire book?"

"All of it."

Nodding approvingly, Dumbledore said, "Again, not unexpected. But you really should be going now to your class."

"Yeah. See you."

"Goodbye, Harry."

As he closed the door behind him, Harry heard one of the portraits say, "There is more to that boy than meets the eye, Dumbledore."

"More than you or he knows," came the Headmaster's voice in reply.

Chapter Five—Falling Together

When Harry found Hermione just outside the dungeons, he saw that she looked rather panicky.

"What's the matter?" he asked, surprised. As soon as she heard his voice, she saw him, and let out a sigh of relief.

"*There* you are! I was worried you'd be late. Can you imagine what Snape would do? And you've been on tenterhooks with him since—"

"First year," Harry interjected.

"Well, yes," Hermione admitted, "but more so this year. Anyway, what did you and Dumbledore talk about?"

"Tons," Harry told her in a low voice. "He answered some of our questions about it, like if Link and Queen Zelda were related."

Hermione scoffed. "I can't believe you brought up something that stupid. They were married, Harry, how many times do I have to remind you?"

"They were cousins," Harry told her by way of answer.

"*What?*" Hermione yelped.

"Calm down," Harry hissed, because two or three people's heads had swivelled around to see the source of the shout. "It's a long story, I'll tell you later."

His judgment call was a good one, because at that moment, the door to the dungeon swung open and Snape looked around at them all. His gaze hovered momentarily on Harry and Hermione and he sneered at them, but the weren't breaking any rules.

"No dawdling," he told them sharply, and he swept aside to allow the students to enter.

Hermione elbowed Harry hard in the arm as they found their usual seats together, near the back. He turned his glare from Snape to her,

but before he could demand the reason for the assault, she told him quietly, "Don't pick a fight."

Harry didn't answer, but he did avoid Snape's evil eye as the lesson began.

"Today we will be working on the Delayed Memory Loss Potions you researched. You know the routine. Hand in your essays on my desk as you collect your ingredients." He flicked his wand at the blackboard, where the instructions appeared, and at the store cupboard, the door of which flew open.

As he handed in his essay, Harry heard Snape say softly, "I do hope this week's work is of a higher quality than last, Potter. Otherwise I'm afraid I may have to take up with the Headmaster the fact that his star pupil is apparently operating under the delusion that he can fake his way through life and counting on having someone there at all times to endorse his otherwise elusive skill."

Harry clenched his fingers around his parchment slightly before managing to relax them enough to place it on the professor's desk. He refused to rise to the taunt, though he could hear a faint ringing in his ears.

For the rest of the class, so long as he managed to keep his mind on his work and staged conversations with Hermione whenever Snape was nearby, Harry found that he could concoct his potion in relative peace; he couldn't help wondering if dodging his most hated teacher would get easier or harder as time went by. He also wondered if it was worth the trouble.

Classes filled that day so completely that Harry all but forgot what he had to talk to Ron and Hermione about in his anxiety over the level of homework he had; memories of the year before reminded him that he would severely regret not putting these assignments at the top of his to do list. Still, it would have been impossible for anything to take the place at the forefront of his mind above the shocking news of his own identity and destiny...or so he thought, until Professor Sinistra bestowed upon them the news that, since they all seemed to have forgotten many of the things that they had learned in previous years, they would have a cumulative exam on the material from their first to

fifth years in the next week. Harry and Ron were stunned with horror, but neither was worse than Hermione, who looked as though she might faint.

The next day was Friday, and Harry and his friends continued to be far too busy to find time to discuss anything, other than, occasionally, school. The evening was devoted to Quidditch practice, where they decided upon their new Chasers. The honour went to a fourth-year girl by the name of Devon Murray, and, unsurprisingly, Ginny Weasley. Harry collapsed into bed that night with his head full of homework and Hermione's thoughts on school sports. Just before slipping into a comatose sleep, it occurred to him that he still hadn't said anything to her and Ron about what Dumbledore had told him. His arm twitched as he made to sit up, to get Ron's attention.

"Tomorrow..." he mumbled, finding that his body simply refused to move now that he had let it stop.

All night, his dreams were vague half-thoughts of Link, Ganondorf, Zelda, Voldemort, Sirius, and other people such as Viktor Krum who had nothing to do with anything. When he awoke on Saturday morning, bleary-eyed and trying to remember why Ruto had been scolding Percy for stealing her Nimbus 2001, he found that the other four in his dorm were still asleep. He looked at his watch and saw that it was seven o'clock; it was still far too early to get up on a weekend, unless he had some secret business to attend to. In previous years, there had always been something covert to do, and he rather thought he preferred those days. These ones were comparatively boring, but still markedly unsafe.

Now he was wide awake, though, his mind buzzing with ideas about the past and the future. It was a clear day out, and he hadn't really been alone since...a day in June when he had sat for hours by the lake, just thinking and missing Sirius. Now that he thought of it, some time to himself would be a welcome change of pace. Something he needed.

Climbing quietly out of bed, so that he wouldn't wake Ron or any others, Harry dressed in comfortable weekend clothes and then crept

out of the dorm, thinking that he might get an early breakfast in the Great Hall before anyone else arrived. It would be peaceful.

As soon as he walked into the hall, he knew he was wrong. Naturally, there was one other person there, the only one who could truly make his breakfast anything but peaceful.

"Well, well... Good morning, Potter."

To be more accurate, there were three people there, but two of them were beings that Harry tended to think of as non-sentient, like rocks. It was the blond haired boy they flanked who required the most attention.

"Get lost, Malfoy," Harry retorted bluntly, turning away from where he, Crabbe and Goyle sat at the Slytherin table in order to make his own way towards the Gryffindor one. It was already piled with food and awaiting its students.

Malfoy rose to his feet, keeping his expression even. "Are you trying to start something, Potter?" he asked sharply.

"No, I'm trying to end something," Harry corrected him swiftly. "This conversation. Get lost." He sat firmly at the breakfast table and began to stack his plate full.

"I don't think I will, thanks," Malfoy countered. "I really think we need to catch up, don't you? What's been going on over the summer for you? Still pen friends with your murderer godfather?"

Harry found himself on his feet and crossing the Great Hall before he realized it. "*Your* father's the murderer, Malfoy. Everybody knows it."

"Oh, that's right I forgot," Malfoy retorted smoothly, unperturbed. "Your godfather was a murder *victim*."

Almost against his will, Harry had instantly swung back a fist to punch Malfoy as hard as he could right in his pointed, sneering face—

"Watch yourself, Potter," came McGonagall's voice, quick and firm. Harry blinked and stopped in his tracks, though he was still seething

with rage. The professor stood in the doorway of the hall, apparently having just arrived for her own breakfast.

"And you, Malfoy," McGonagall said now, turning to him. "While Potter does not have the right to strike you under any circumstances, I must inform you that you cannot cross the line of human decency and expect to get away with it. Understood?"

Malfoy continued to glare venomously at Harry as he spat, "Yes, Professor."

"Good. Ten points from Slytherin. Now leave each other alone."

Before Harry made to return to the Gryffindor table, he heard Malfoy hiss, "I've told you before and I'll tell you again, Potter. You've picked the losing side. This means war."

Only just managing to suppress the violent rage that roiled up within him, Harry said loudly, "I'll eat something later. I've lost my appetite."

Without waiting for a response, he whipped around and stormed out of the Great Hall. When he swung one of its massive doors closed behind him, the *bang* resounded so loudly that Harry thought it might awaken to whole school. This gave him an odd satisfaction.

Outside, the late summer sun made everything look greener and more alive than it normally did; the cerulean sky itself was teeming with life as puffs of cloud glided across its surface like dancers over a stage. The waters of the lake glittered as though light was raining down on them, and the surface was undisturbed by anything except for a small breath of wind. It was blowing gently on Harry's face as well, and felt as energetic and somehow cognizant as the world looked right now.

He wasn't altogether surprised to feel a small, hot prickle in the corners of his eyes.

Harry found himself a seat on a large rock overlooking the lake, crossed his legs and looked out at the morning that stretched out before him resplendently. Life was beautiful.

But...life was unfair, too. Life murdered two young people who were brave and loving and had a baby son. Life let that baby boy grow up in a home where his own family longed for him to suffer. Life took the minds of a couple who wanted to make the world a better place. Life ostracized good people and made them objects of ridicule. Life made people believe lies and disbelieve truth. Life put an innocent man in prison, took twelve of his years, put a price on his head, and killed him only hours before he could have gotten his freedom back. Life ruined lives.

No, Harry thought, and the tears that had been threatening to stream down his face retreated instantly. No, it wasn't life that did any of those things, that took so much away from people who deserved so much more. Life just went past every day and gave people chances; it was the people themselves who made things happen, both good and bad. The only things life created were moments like this, where everything was beautiful.

And as for who created the suffering, the agony, the misery... It was always, in some way, shape or form, Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters. It had always been the fault of the ones who sought absolute power, the ones who were true evil.

"And if it's up to me to stop them...if I have to kill them all to do it..." he whispered recklessly, his warm breath issuing out into the breeze, "then I'll do it. They deserve it."

The image of Bellatrix Lestrange, her once-beautiful face, robbed of its looks by Azkaban as Sirius' had been, flashed in Harry's mind, and anger flared in the pit of his stomach. *Her...* He had vowed to kill her in June, and his resolution remained unchanged.

For a long minute, Harry just sat there with his mind empty except for blank pain. He tried to think of another topic toward which to turn his reverie, and it wandered onto Ron and Hermione.

They had been acting unusually lately. Mainly, Harry noticed that they had been fighting often, even by their standards. It was almost as if they enjoyed their own constant bickering. Yet, at the same time as they were being as snarky with each other as they had ever been, they were also managing to endure each other's company more than

ever before. In previous years, they had used Harry as a buffer; many times, it had occurred to him that they most likely would never have been friends if not for him. This year, however, they were managing to coexist peacefully through direct interaction. Maybe they were just maturing.

He didn't know how long he had been sitting there, staring at the bright lake, before a shriek of laughter from some distant part of the grounds broke his concentration. He looked up and saw that some students had leaked out of the castle to enjoy the warm weather. Checking his watch, he saw that it was approaching ten o'clock, and his stomach growled in protest at having been denied sustenance earlier. He therefore clambered down from his rock and re-entered the castle as everyone else was leaving, taking a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the suddenly contrasting darkness of indoors.

The Great Hall was busy, so he blended in with the breakfast-eating crowd, but Ron and Hermione were not among them. He ate more quickly than he usually would have done, not being involved in a conversation, then headed up to Gryffindor Tower.

When he arrived there, however, he found that his friends weren't present. They hadn't been in the Great Hall, he mentally double checked, nor had they been in the Entrance Hall, nor had they been on the grounds when he had been, so most likely they were wandering the halls somewhere. But where?

Feeling slightly hurt that they had gone off somewhere without him, he began to scour the halls near Gryffindor Tower, but was turning up nothing. Deciding to make his way towards the Owlery, in case they had perhaps needed to send a letter, he approached a corridor branching off to his left.

Then he heard voices arguing off in the opposite direction, and he recognized them as Ron and Hermione. They sounded like they were in one of their most vicious fights ever. Harry had never heard Ron yelling with such anger, not even when he had suspected Crookshanks of eating Scabbers.

"I've never seen you be so *naïve* about anything! You've always the smart one! The logical one!"

"Oh, shut up, Ron! You don't know what you're talking about! The closest you've ever come to actually *caring* about someone was—was that irritating, self-centred little brat, Fleur!" Hermione was snarling, spitting like a wildcat.

"Why are you dragging *her* into this?! She has nothing to do with—!"

"She just proves the way you are! The way you've always liked the girls who are the prettiest, and who cares if they're sweet or stupid!"

Harry froze, just around the corner and out of their sight, listening. This was a strange fight.

Ron was apparently at a loss for a comeback. "I— You— How— You don't understand how—I—"

"What?" sneered Hermione irritably. "How you *feel*?"

Ron didn't give any answer that Harry could hear, though he was listening intently now, but something must have happened, because he heard a few quiet footsteps, and as he took a step forward himself, listening closely, he heard Hermione speaking apologetically.

"I'm sorry, Ron. I didn't mean..."

"Yes, you did."

There was another silence. Harry heard a few small sounds of their movement, then Hermione's voice again.

"Ron..."

"Yeah?"

Harry strained his ears harder than he had ever done before, longing for a pair of Fred and George's Extendable ones, but he didn't hear anything. Nervously, he peered around the corner, and couldn't believe what he saw.

Hermione and Ron were standing facing each other, very close together, with their eyes closed, and he was leaning in towards her...

Harry felt his stomach flip over, and before he could think, he was running away. He knew they must have heard him, but he was too busy trying to block out of his mind what he had just seen. It couldn't be. *It couldn't be.*

He burst into the Gryffindor common room and up to his dorm. He closed the door hard behind him and began to pace around the room, grateful on some level that the other Gryffindor boys were all awake and elsewhere. His heart was pounding so hard that he couldn't sit down. He pressed his hands against his eyes until small stars burst into his vision, but the image would not go away. Whatever Dumbledore had told him was not as shocking as this. He didn't know how he would be able to look at them again. Nothing could possibly be the same now. Ever.

Flopping onto his bed, he tried to put the pieces of the hypothetical future together, to test his own reaction. Ron and Hermione, going out. Ron and Hermione, boyfriend and girlfriend. Ron and Hermione, *kissing*.

Digging the heels of his hands into his eyes, he didn't know whether he wanted to laugh, scream, or be sick at the thought; he cringed, and found that he was gritting his teeth as though being tortured for information he was refusing to give up. It was just so bizarre.

"Er...Harry?"

The door creaked open, and Ron poked his head into the room. Harry stared determinedly at the ceiling, not wanting to look at his best friend.

"Are you angry?" asked Ron rather lamely, still standing in the doorway.

"No," said Harry, in a strange voice that he had to struggle to keep under control, speaking each word slowly and carefully. "Just a little confused."

"Yeah. I... Do you want to talk about it?"

Harry considered. "Where's Hermione?"

"In the common room," Ron answered slowly.

"Was talking about it her idea?"

Ron said nothing, which Harry took as confirmation.

"What happened?" asked Harry jerkily.

After hesitating a moment, Ron entered the dorm and closed the door behind him. He crossed the room towards the window as he explained uncomfortably.

"We were down at breakfast when the post came, and she had a letter...from Viktor. It said he thought that trying to be anything more than friends with her over a long distance just wasn't going to work, and he still really liked her, but it wasn't fair to either of them to keep anything going when there was no hope. That's what he wrote, anyway, but she didn't buy it. She got all upset, she said he was just trying to let her off easy but really it was just that he didn't care about her anymore. I tried to be a friend, you know, tell her how I'd never really liked him and all that, but it didn't seem to help. I dunno. She said she wanted to go for a walk—inside, because everyone's outside today—and she just wanted me to listen."

Harry bit back saying that Ron had been doing a lot more than listening, from what he had heard.

"So I was trying to just listen," Ron continued, "but it was really hard when she kept going on about how nice he way. I mean, five minutes before that, she's saying he's a lying creep! So I told her what I thought, which was that she should just forget about him.

"Then she got all mad at me. She started yelling about how I don't understand that she can't just forget about him because she still cares about him. I started yelling at her that she was being naïve—"

"Yeah, I heard that part," Harry forced out.

"Oh," said Ron, not managing to keep the surprise from his voice. "Right. So, anyway, when she made some comment about how I just

like girls who are pretty, we just sort of...stared at each other, and then...I just *got it*."

"Got what?"

"I just *understood*. For so long it's been... She drives me mad. I know that, you know that, she knows that. But I couldn't figure out *why* she drives me mad, and then I just realized it's because—"

Ron paused, running his fingers through his hair as he stared out the window. Then he turned back to Harry and said almost pleadingly, "You know what I mean. Don't you?"

Harry shook his head candidly. Ron looked different to him suddenly; less like his best friend, the second-youngest Weasley, Keeper on the Gryffindor team, and everything else. More like a teenager.

"Well..." Ron began, clearly struggling for the right words. "I think she always drove me mad because it was like she was...taunting me, you know? Like, just by existing, and especially by having her little fling or whatever with Viktor, she was reminding me that she wasn't my girlfriend. Do you know what I mean?"

Harry had never felt any such thing towards a girl. He wished he could have truthfully said he understood, but he simply didn't, and so he just continued to stare blankly at Ron, who shrugged and sat on his bed.

Sitting up, Harry ventured to ask slowly, "What exactly did you... What happened?"

Ron gave a noise that might have been a laugh if it had been stronger. "Nothing," he said. "We were just about to...you know..."

Harry nodded. Ron was having as much difficulty in saying the word as Harry was in thinking it.

"Yeah. But before we could, we heard something, and we jumped over and saw you running away, so we followed you, 'cause we figured you'd seen...us. And now we're here."

There was a knock at the door, and they both jumped. Hermione's voice said, "What's taking so long? Harry, are you furious? Let's talk about this, please, like civilized people—"

"Oh, just come in, Hermione," sighed Harry.

She opened the door and stuck her head into the room, looking highly flustered. "Let's go outside or something," she said earnestly. "Let's get some air."

"Good idea," muttered Harry, and he and Ron followed her out of the dorm. As they left the tower, Harry stood next to Hermione, who had Ron on her left, and wondered which of the two of them he blamed more for this.

"So...so Ron told you what happened?" Hermione began anxiously as soon as they were outside. "That we didn't actually ki—"

"Only because I interrupted you," Harry snapped back. He felt distinctly more betrayed now that both of them were present. "What would you have done if I hadn't been there? No, never mind, I don't want to know!"

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look, and Harry felt himself grow angrier.

"Harry, it's not as though we planned this," Hermione pointed out. "We're not trying to shut you out—"

"Oh, yeah? Going on little morning strolls together to spill your heart out isn't shutting me out? It's like last summer at Grimmauld Place!" As soon as he spoke, he realized what he was saying, and charged on, "Did this start then? Tell me the truth!"

"No!" cried Ron vehemently.

"Well..." said Hermione sheepishly.

Ron and Harry both stared at her.

"Excuse me?" Ron snapped, in a higher voice than usual. "This is the first I've heard of it!"

"Well, we didn't *do* anything," Hermione elaborated. "But we did start to... I mean, Ginny told me that she'd seen us together a couple of times when we didn't know she was there, and she said we were just acting like a couple. She actually asked me if we were going out."

Ron gaped. "I'll kill her," he finally said matter-of-factly.

"Honestly, Ron, what for?" Hermione asked. "For noticing that we weren't acting normally? She was right! It's not her fault, it's ours. Is this really a surprise? You never noticed that there was...something?"

Harry flashed on the Yule Ball in fourth year; Ron had been spitting mad at Hermione. It made sense now, with Ron's explanation of how he had felt she was taunting him. And Hermione had said even then that he should have asked her...

"Look," Hermione was saying now, clearly exasperated with both of them. "We can't pretend this didn't happen, because it did, and even if we don't admit it, we can't avoid it, either, because it'll happen again. Harry, even though this isn't our fault, I'll give you an apology if that's what you want. And Ron, it's up to you."

Ron jumped, looking at her with wide eyes, apparently feeling a strong desire not to have to make any decisions. "What is?" he demanded fearfully.

Hermione was looking at him oddly, and Harry suddenly wished he could be anywhere but in their company. Looking down, she said "We need to decide what's going to happen...between us."

Harry took this as his cue to walk away, certain they wouldn't miss him. He sat down in the grass a few feet away, unable to keep himself from watching them out of the corner of his eye. They were talking with their heads very close together, quietly enough that he couldn't hear their words, but he could see them smiling now, and holding hands...

And then Harry realized why he was having such a hard time with this; he had thought it was just because they were his friends, but he couldn't deny, now that he thought about it, that much of their strange behaviour in the past had probably been a result of all this. No, the reason the situation really bothered him was that he didn't have anything like it in his own life. His so-called relationship with Cho the previous year had been his first serious attempt at having a girlfriend, and it had been an utter mess of tears on her part and frustration on his, with fights in between. But Ron and Hermione had already known each other for years, and though they might not have agreed on everything, they did know how each other's minds worked. They were both happy when they were together, and there was no awkwardness. Friends... That was where a good relationship like this one had to begin. What exactly did that mean?

Harry, who had been staring at his hands as he mulled over this, looked up at them again and saw they were walking towards him, still holding hands. He suspected they had reached a verdict.

"So," he said, standing up and trying as hard as he could not to sound bitter, "should I say congratulations?"

"Yeah, well, we're..." To complete the thought, Ron waved one of his hands between himself and Hermione, the hand that wasn't in hers.

"We've decided that we're going out," Hermione finished gently, almost apologetically. "Is that okay?"

Harry shrugged, hoping he looked casual. "Hey, it's not up to me, is it?"

There was a thick silence. Finally Harry summed up the energy and ability to be genuinely happy for them. "Really—I'm glad for you."

Ron and Hermione beamed.

"Thanks, mate."

"That means a lot to us, Harry."

Harry nodded uncomfortably, not sure what to say. "Let's head back to the castle," he finally suggested. Ron and Hermione voiced their assent immediately.

As they began to cross the grounds, Hermione said, "Hey, Harry, I've just realized— You still haven't told us what Dumbledore said when you gave that book back!"

Harry blinking, reaching back into his memory and discovering that this was indeed true. He had taken so long to tell them, with one distraction and another, that by now he had assumed he must have done it already. "Oh, yeah..."

And he launched into the explanation; it was a good change of subject, and certainly held their attention. By the time they arrived at Gryffindor Tower, he had gotten to the end, his own identity as Link's descendant and a True Hero, and he was quite sure he had never seen either of them gaping in such shock.

"You're like...the Heir of Gryffindor!" Ron exclaimed. "Like how You-Know-Who's the Heir of Slytherin!"

This hadn't crossed Harry's mind. "I guess I am," he agreed.

Hermione let out a gasp.

"What?" asked both boys instantly.

"Of course! I *knew* he looked familiar..." Without another word, she bolted away to her dormitory. Ron sighed.

"She still does drive me mad, though," he informed Harry as they took their usual seats by the fire to wait for her return.

Hermione returned a moment later, and the boys saw her carrying a massive volume that they had never seen before; as soon as she sat down and placed it on her lap, though, they saw the title.

"Oh," said Harry, smirking at her. "So this is the infamous *Hogwarts: A History* that we've heard so much about, is it?"

She smiled back without looking up, her eyes focused on the task of flipping through the hundreds of pages before her. "That's right. I want to show you something... Where is it..." Her voice trailed away as she talked to herself, skimming the words, then she said, "Ah, here! There's a chapter on the founders." Propping the book up in her lap, she read aloud.

"Godric Gryffindor placed as much value on his family as on his work towards the betterment of wizarding society. His daughter, Keitha, was a member of the third graduating class of the school, and his son, Leocore, was of the fifth."

Hermione turned the book around to show it to Harry and Ron, who leaned forward in their chairs to look at the small pictures in the margins of the text. Atop the page was a portrait of Godric Gryffindor, looking strikingly similar to Link, under a heading of his name. Below this, next to the curvaceously illuminated moniker of Keitha, was a miniature portrait of a smiling young woman with golden hair in gracious curls around her face, who looked exactly like someone else that Harry had seen before.

"She looks just like Queen Zelda!" he exclaimed. "I mean...she doesn't have the pointy ears, and she's got a few freckles, but still, it's pretty close."

"Yeah, you're right," Ron agreed. "But look at Leocore!"

Another small picture, similar to Keitha's, smiled up at them and waved. The young man in question had dark hair, glasses, bright eyes and a slim face. Ron couldn't stop himself from laughing.

"Some things never change, huh?" he observed.

"He doesn't look *that* much like me," Harry disagreed, though he was smiling as well. "He's got freckles like his sister, and different hair—"

"You mean neat hair," Ron corrected him. Hermione rolled her eyes.

It was true that the resemblance between Harry and Leocore wasn't as striking as that between Zelda and Keitha, but it was unmistakable.

"That wasn't my point, though," Hermione said. "I was thinking this. Dumbledore said you have the bloodlines of both Courage and Wisdom, right?"

"Right..."

"And you do, of course, but doesn't it look like they split up here?"

Ron and Harry exchanged doubtful expressions.

"Hermione, they couldn't have totally separated," Ron pointed out. "No matter what, both of those kids came from both and Link and Queen Zelda's bloodlines."

"I know," Hermione mused; it appeared that her train of thought had run out, and she was developing it now as she spoke, looking considerably at the pictures. "Doesn't it seem weird to you, though, that what's always been a three-part conflict would come down to two parts?"

"Things changed, Hermione," Harry said. "That's what Dumbledore said. Because Link III and Queen Zelda III married, and then Link IV wasn't from the other Heroes' bloodline."

She gave a small, thoughtful sigh. "I just think that seems like one of those things that would *never* change. There are three pieces of the Triforce, so there should be three people to fight for them. Isn't it possible that you're Leocore's descendant and someone else is Keitha's, and represents the Triforce of Wisdom?"

"Dumbledore would've said something about it, though," Ron suggested. "Unless he doesn't know who it is...but even then, you'd think he'd mention that there are three people..."

Harry had stopped listening, lost in thought. If he had noticed Hermione's expression, he would have seen understanding on it. Without her explanation, though, something clicked in his own mind, and he bolted away.

"Harry, where are you going?"

His mind was so completely elsewhere that he was surprised to find himself halting so soon before the large stone gargoyle, and nearly overbalanced in his attempt to stop suddenly.

"Oh... Chocolate!" he said, reaching out for the wall with one hand.

As soon as the gargoyle jumped aside, he began running up the moving staircase to reach the top as quickly as possible, and hammered on the door.

"Professor Dumbledore!"

"Come in," came the Headmaster's voice, sounding slightly surprised.

Harry threw open the door, pointing across the room at him, and exclaimed, "You! *You!*"

Dumbledore, who was standing at a bookshelf with a few items in his hands, apparently organizing them, raised his eyebrows. "I beg your pardon? What about me?"

"You!" Harry said again. "I'm not the Triforce of Wisdom, *you* are! *You're* Queen Zelda's descendant, Gryffindor and Keitha's!"

"Ah, so you discovered Keitha and Leocore, did you?" Dumbledore asked, laying the few books he still held down on his desk.

"Hermione did! And she thought there would have to be three people fighting for the Triforce, and you're the third!"

Dumbledore, who had been looking at Harry, turned his head to gaze out the window over the grounds. "The Triforce of Wisdom. The guide. A respected authority figure, very close to the Triforce of Courage, very magically powerful. You spotted the parallels."

"They're kind of hard to miss," Harry informed him dryly. "But why didn't you tell me?"

"Because...there is one more trait which always defines the Triforce of Wisdom. Do you know what that is?"

Harry could think of many things that the four Zeldas had in common, namely that they were all blonde-haired, blue-eyed, idealized images of princesses. But none of that applied to Dumbledore. "No."

"The Triforce of Courage," the Headmaster explained carefully, "always fights for the things he cares about. Ganondorf knew this, and targeted all the things Link I cared about. Not only the land of Hyrule in general, but his home in the forest, his friends and loved ones. Saria was trapped in a forest filled with Ganon's demons. A man pledging loyalty to him took control of the ranch where Malon worked and kept her under his control. And finally, when the three pieces of the Triforce stood on the edge of battle, he attacked Queen Zelda, for beyond being someone dear to Link, she was also a powerful threat herself. That was what forced Link to face the King of Evil, to learn that his desire for heroism and his dreams of saving the world were not so glorious when he could put names and faces to those who were suffering."

Dumbledore paused here before continuing, his voice sounding slightly less controlled.

"Voldemort has already begun to target the things you love, Harry. You know this. We discussed it last year. He has already begun to manipulate your natural willingness to do anything to save them..."

"And so...he's going to attack you," Harry finished quietly. Though he tried to make it sound normal, his voice was heavy when it emerged from his throat.

"I am the other side of your success, Harry," Dumbledore said quietly, "the one who guides you, provides you information, fights at your side. When the final battle between yourself and Lord Voldemort culminates...the one in which either you or he must die...my life also shall hang in the balance."

Harry couldn't feel his body. His voice didn't sound like his own as he said, "Why... Why didn't you tell me?"

Again, there was a brief pause before Dumbledore answered.

"With the fate of the world resting on your shoulders, Harry...I did not want to add the weight of my own life. You are a True Hero, and this means both that there are more important things for you to concern yourself with than any one individual...and that you will not believe that there possibly could be."

Chapter Six—Ageless Wars

Over the next weeks, the dynamic of the friendship between Harry, Ron and Hermione that had been going strong for five years began to settle itself into a different pattern. There were times when it felt the same as it always had, but then there were times when Harry felt distinctly like a third wheel, and found himself alone. Hermione, too, sometimes ended up on the outside, because she seemed more like a girl now and less like just someone with whom two teenage boys could share anything. When Ron wasn't around, which admittedly wasn't very often, Harry wasn't sure how to act towards Hermione; was she his friend, or his friend's girlfriend?

"Harry, nothing's changed between you and me," she told him one day as they sat in the common room together; Ron had gone to the library to find another History of Magic book. That had become a common pastime for him this year.

"I know," Harry said, nervously fidgeting with his hands and not looking at her. He could feel her regarding him thoughtfully before she spoke up, in her usual conversational tone.

"So the other day, while Ron and I were snogging—"

"WHAT?!"

Harry actually jumped in his seat, and snapped his face up at Hermione so fast that he heard his neck crack. She was looking back at him, perfectly calmly.

"That's the kind of thing you're worried about, isn't it?" she asked, a slow smile spreading across her face.

"No," Harry answered quickly, unamused by her joke. "You can do whatever you want, I just don't want to hear about it."

"That's what I meant—hearing about it. But...Harry, look at me," she interrupted herself.

He slowly managed to meet her eye. Her expression was totally serious.

"I am still your friend," she told him. "I won't do that to you." She smiled, encouraging him to do the same. He managed to return the gesture, and though it was challenging to do, he found that it felt natural once the smile was in place. It was the first such smile he'd had with Hermione since everything had changed.

"I know you are," he said, and it was also the first time he'd felt that statement was true.

Of course, the rest of the school also had to come to terms with this dramatic rearrangement of one of the most constant trios at Hogwarts. Reactions varied from Ginny's ("It's about time!") to Katie's ("That's so *cute*!") to Dean's ("Nice one, Ron!") to Parvati's ("Hermione, *why*?") to, of course, Draco Malfoy's.

The latter of these came just before one Potions class when Ron, who was leaving just as Malfoy was arriving, gave Hermione a quick goodbye kiss. Such occurrences were common now, and Harry was learning not to notice or care. Malfoy was another story altogether.

"Hold it, Weasley," came his voice loudly, so full of incredulity that it was hardly even sneering. Ron froze just as he was about to walk away, and turned slowly to face his enemy.

"Oh, Ron, don't," whispered Hermione, putting a hand on his shoulder. Harry thought she had to know her protests were futile, for Malfoy was already taunting again.

"So the Mudblood and the blood traitor! I guess I shouldn't be surprised. It's not like either one of them could do better."

The Slytherins laughed, and Harry saw Hermione tighten her grip on Ron's shoulder.

"Not fighting back?" Malfoy teased in a tone of mock surprise. "What's the matter— Your *girlfriend* won't let you? Or is it just 'cause you know I'm right?"

More Slytherin laughter. Ron reached for his wand, but Hermione grabbed his arm with her other hand.

"Hermione—" he began angrily.

"No, Ron, he's not worth it."

At that moment, the dungeon door opened and Snape looked out at the scene. His eyes moved from the Gryffindor side, where everyone was standing back and Hermione was holding onto Ron, to the Slytherin side, where Malfoy had slipped into the crowd.

"Trying to start something, are we, Weasley?" Snape observed smoothly. "Five points from Gryffindor. Now get out of my sight, since you did not meet the requirements of my NEWT Potions class, and no one... *vouched* for your skill." He turned his gaze coldly to Harry on the last words.

"Gladly," muttered Ron. Hermione released him, and he pushed his way through the other Gryffindors and off to the stairs.

"*Why* are you so annoyed, Ron?! Haven't you learned by now not to take anything Malfoy says seriously?!"

"*I don't!*"

"Then why do you let him get to you?!"

"Because...you heard what he said! How am I supposed to just ignore stuff like *that?*!"

"Are you kidding?! I'd consider 'blood traitor' a compliment, coming from—"

"Not that! What he called you!"

Harry was trying to stay engrossed in his Charms homework, but it was proving difficult when Ron and Hermione were standing nearby in the midst of a furious battle, their first one as a couple. Most of the common room was watching inconspicuously.

"*That?*!" Hermione was shouting. "So now you're jumping up to *defend* me?!"

"Well, I'm not just gonna sit there! What do you expect?!"

"I expect you to have enough faith in me to trust that I can take care of myself!"

"I do! I know you can, but you never do!"

"I don't sink to his level!"

"I don't let him walk all over me!"

"I'm civilized about it!"

"I just want him to shut the hell up!"

"He's never going to stop!"

"Not if we don't make him!"

It suddenly occurred to Harry that if they broke up, they would hate each other, and he would be stuck between them; there was no way he would be able to remain friends with both, inevitably having to listen to each complain endlessly about the other. Beginning to panic at this prospect, he lay down his quill and took a more active interest in the fight.

"Violence isn't going to solve anything!"

"Look who's talking, Little Miss Slapped-Him-Around-The-Face-In-Third-Year!"

"And I regret it! But you probably loved that, didn't you?!"

"I've never been happier!"

"Well, he crossed the line then, calling Hagrid pathetic!"

"And he crossed the line calling you *that*!"

"So, what, your excuse for stupid behaviour is that you're just trying to prove that you care about me?!"

"Exactly!"

There was a loaded silence, then, quite unexpectedly, they put their arms around each other and kissed briefly.

"Sorry, Hermione."

"Me, too."

"It won't happen again."

"Yes, it will. Just don't get caught."

"Deal."

And they sat down to resume their homework.

Every year, the Hogwarts Quidditch season opened with the most heated match the school would see until the final for the cup: Gryffindor versus Slytherin. Harry couldn't help wondering if there wasn't a bit of sadism at play in the mind of whoever had conceived that schedule. Why start out with the worst carnage? To give the students a taste of bloodlust for the rest of the year?

He also didn't like that his first match in his first year as captain, this team's first year together, would be against Draco Malfoy and his comrades. There was nothing he could do about it, though, except continue to prove that the Gryffindors were the better players.

So, here he stood, before the other six members of his team, trying to think of effective words of encouragement to pass along. Somehow, he didn't think that, "Let's humiliate Malfoy," or, "Prove that you're your father's son," would be applicable to everyone.

Shaking his head to make himself focus, Harry took a deep breath. "All right, team," he began, "we're ready for this. I know we are, you know we are, and those Slytherins know we are, too. Am I right?"

There was a murmur of agreement. Harry sighed.

"Come on, how about some enthusiasm?" he asked. "I said, those Slytherins know we're ready to beat them. *Right?*"

"Right!" the Gryffindor's echoed with much more confidence.

"Good!" Harry said, pleased. "So let's go out there and prove it! We're going to be the champions by the end of the year, and it starts today! *Right?*"

"Right!"

"Good!" he said again. Waving for them to follow him out to the pitch, he called, "Move out, Gryffindors!"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, they sounded strange. Move out? It was like a military command.

The other Gryffindors didn't think anything of it, though. They simply followed him out of the locker room to the pitch, and their first match.

When they appeared, they met a wave of sound so powerful that it struck them like a physical blow. Harry was used to this by now, and it didn't throw him off. What he did find strange was being at the head of the small crowd. Part of him felt certain that the other six weren't behind him, and were simply letting him walk out onto the pitch alone, looking like a complete idiot. Fortunately, the commentary given by fourth-year Ravenclaw Toby Wainwright, who had taken over the job since Lee Jordan's graduation, disproved his fears.

"And here's the Gryffindor team: Bell, Kirke, Murray, Potter, Sloper, Weasley and Weasley. We've seen most of these players before, but never in this combination, so it'll definitely be interesting to see what they're like, and I'm sure all Hogwarts' young bookies in the making will be eager to see how the odds shape up after this inaugural performance... Kidding, Professor McGonagall!" He laughed nervously under her glare before continuing. "Now, as I was saying, it will also be interesting to see Potter's performance as captain, though I daresay that if he's anywhere near as good in that role as he is as a Seeker, the Gryffindor team will remain unchallenged as long as he leads them..."

Harry couldn't help smiling at the boos of the Slytherin supporters on the far end, even as he faced their captain, Montague, who bared his teeth.

Apparently the Slytherins had already had their introduction, because Madam Hooch was now instructing the captains to shake hands. They did so, Montague squeezing rather harder than Harry felt was necessary, before parting and mounting their brooms on her command.

Madam Hooch raised her whistle to her lips and blew. The match had begun.

Now, how long would it be until...?

"Hey, Potter!"

Apparently not long at all.

Harry glared as Malfoy flew towards him, but said nothing.

"What's the matter, Potter?" his enemy sneered in his usual drawling tone, which never failed to give Harry the urge to punch him in the face. "Don't like starting off the season with a game you know you're going to lose?"

"No," Harry retorted icily. "I just think it's unfair that they make me put this effort into publicly humiliating you every year."

Now it was Malfoy who glared. "That's what you think."

"Yeah, that is what I think," Harry confirmed.

"Bell shoots... TEN POINTS TO GRYFFINDOR!" came the commentary. Harry shot Malfoy a smile.

"And it sounds like I'm right," he added.

Malfoy was spared having to devise a comeback when a Bludger came hurtling towards both Seekers, and they darted off in opposite directions to avoid it.

From that point on, Harry tried to keep his mind on the game, ignoring the taunts Malfoy constantly threw at him in an attempt to irritate him out of concentration. Instead, he focused strictly on the commentary. The score kept bouncing back and forth.

"And we've been playing for over half an hour, and the score is tied at—NO! The score is now fifty to forty for Slytherin as captain Montague scores!"

Harry let out a groan of frustration. Ron was a greatly improved Keeper from who he had been last year, but he still didn't deal well with pressure.

"Looks like Weasley's still our king, doesn't it?" laughed Malfoy, soaring past Harry.

"The Weasleys always rule the pitch!" came the answer, but it wasn't from Harry; Ginny zoomed past the two of them, Quaffle in hand, so quickly that Harry had to duck out of her way and Malfoy nearly fell from his broom. They both watched, momentarily stunned, as she wove expertly past players on both sides before scoring sharply on the Slytherin Keeper to make up for the Gryffindors' lapse in record time. Harry laughed at the sight as she lazily flew back towards the middle of the pitch.

"Nice one, Ginny!" Harry called, exchanging a high five with her. "You sure wiped the smirk off Malfoy's face!"

Ginny smiled back modestly, but fear suddenly lit her eyes, and she screamed, "Harry, look!"

From her tone, Harry expected to see Voldemort and his hundred strongest Death Eaters on the march when he looked where she was pointing. What he saw wasn't that, of course, but it was nearly as bad; Malfoy was tearing towards the Gryffindor end, with the Golden Snitch just ahead of him.

Cursing his negligence, Harry urged his Firebolt on. It didn't need encouragement, and shot like a rocket in the direction he intended.

"And I think this game might be coming to an end as our Seekers have gone into action! Malfoy of Slytherin with the lead, but Potter of Gryffindor is gaining quickly! It's going to be close! OH!"

Abruptly, the Snitch changed course, veering left and soaring back the way it had come, apparently not noticing that this route would lead it directly into Harry's outstretched hand—

But Malfoy wouldn't give up that easily. He turned as well, making to collide with Harry's arm and throw himself into the Snitch's path—

The two of them smashed together full force. Harry couldn't see clearly in the confused tangled of his own limbs and Malfoy's, and scarlet and green robes. His glasses slipped askew on his face, but he didn't care. Grasping with one hand for the tiny, golden ball, he made a fist with the other and began randomly attacking anything he could see that was green or blond—

A whistle blew. At the same moment, something brushed his fingers, and he just managed to catch one of the Snitch's wings between them as he closed his fist. Feeling himself about to fall, he grabbed at something with his other hand, which turned out to be Malfoy's collar—

Then he realized that they had gradually been sinking, and in fact now hovered only a few feet from the ground. He released his grip on his opponent's robes, extracting himself from the brawl, and landed.

Madam Hooch was there in an instant.

"Unacceptable!" roared the referee. "*Fighting* like that in mid-air! Blatching, Cobbing, and I don't even know where to begin explaining what else! Foul shots for both teams—"

"But Madam Hooch," Harry objected, "I caught the Snitch! The game's over!"

"Foul shots regardless!" Hooch snapped. "And your heads of houses will deal with you as well!"

Harry doubted Malfoy would get in trouble from Snape, even though he deserved it. Now that they were safely on the ground, Harry could see that he and his opponent were both looking rough and beginning to develop bruises

The fact that Gryffindor missed their foul shot while Slytherin scored didn't make a difference. The final score was two hundred to sixty for Gryffindor, and everyone except Harry was pleased with the victory. He supposed he had no right to complain, especially since McGonagall had simply given him detention for unnecessary violence and didn't even subject him to a lecture. In the end, however, Ron was the one who knew just how to cheer him up.

"Think of it this way, mate. You landed Malfoy a good shot to the back of the head."

While their first major fight had made gossip headlines, Ron and Hermione soon became known for such occurrences. On an almost nightly basis, they would argue vociferously in the Gryffindor common room up something that didn't matter, kiss and make up, and then be perfectly content together again. Far from being worried or annoyed, the Gryffindors openly gathered to watch these matches now that they were sure the result wasn't going to be a painful break-up. Even Harry usually took time out from his work to enjoy the evening's entertainment. He was satisfied that things had fallen into a regular order now, and getting more confident by the day that no matter how stupid Ron was, and no matter how self-righteous Hermione was, neither one would break the other's heart. Neither had said the "L" word yet, at least not that he knew of, but it was sort of assumed. Overall, he had to admit that it wasn't so bad, now that he was used to it. Even Crookshanks seemed to accept sharing Hermione's affection with someone else, and appreciate Ron's efforts to pet him.

Quite often, the three of them were the last ones to go to bed at night, and had the common room to themselves; this had been the case for years. When it happened now, though, Harry tended to voluntarily go to bed first, to give the other two some time together.

"I'm going to sleep," he said on the last night before Christmas vacation. "We've got two weeks of partying to look forward to, and I want to get some rest."

"Night, Harry."

"Good night."

As he headed up the stairs to the dormitory, Harry heard the familiar faint sounds of kissing from the common room below. Then he heard something else.

"Ron?"

"Hm?"

A pause, then, very quietly, "I love you."

Another pause. "I love you, too, Hermione."

With everything that had been going on in his life, Harry had all but forgotten about the outside world. Over Christmas break, however, that changed dramatically. Though he didn't find himself subjected to dreams any more distinct or worrisome than mere flashes, which may or may not have been clairvoyant and certainly didn't yield any useful information, this was almost more irritating than if he had been suffering compete nightmares. His scar was also beginning to act up more and more every day; it ached and burned virtually non-stop, which was infinitely frustrating and annoying. This constant reminder of the external forces that were building against him had been driven out of his mind when there were classes and Quidditch matches to keep up with, but when these were taken away over vacation, he found himself alone with his concerns and growing dreads.

He began to sink into an emotional pit of isolation. He spent more and more time in bed, retiring early and sleeping in late, emerging when doggedly coached to do so, and even then usually doing no more than sitting in an armchair by the hearth and staring into the flames. At these time, a dull ache throbbed within him as he remembered the conversations he had had with Sirius' head in this very fireplace...the

grief was another thing that routine had brushed aside, which he couldn't escape from now, which swelled within him like a sickness...

Yet even as he dwelled on himself, he obsessed over what Voldemort must have been doing outside the castle walls, which had never felt so much like a stifling prison, keeping out information.

In fact, this wasn't entirely true, because information was coming into the castle regularly. Hermione received the *Daily Prophet* by owl post, and Harry was sure that the members of the Order of the Phoenix were exchanging news, even if they didn't keep him informed. The problem was that there didn't appear to be any information to be obtained. As he had done before the Ministry had accepted his return, Voldemort was maintaining a conspicuously low profile. Ron pointed out the obvious one day by stating that this probably signalled that he was plotting something major.

Then, four days before Christmas, they got a break.

Ron and Hermione exploded into the common room, where Harry had slid from his chair to the hearth, to be nearer the fire. It was morning, and they had been in the Great Hall eating breakfast. Their dramatic entrance made Harry look up, but he displayed no more emotional reaction, and when he saw who it was, he looked back down.

"Harry!" gasped Hermione desperately.

He struggled to tear his eyes away from the hypnotic flames, but before he could manage it, she had shoved the *Daily Prophet* under his nose. It took him several seconds to be able to focus on the headline.

SUSPICIOUS MURDER IN IRELAND

He blinked, feeling concern swell slowly within him, almost below his awareness, and then read on, becoming more conscious as he did.

After months of an uncharacteristic lack of overt activity, authorities have reason to believe that He Who Must Not Be Named has struck.

The victim is a Muggle man in southeastern Ireland who owned a small museum of Irish history. Aurors today released a statement concerning his death.

"Muggle police think this was a simply robbery gone bad, and they haven't seen any signs of magic which we've had to cover up. In fact, the connection to our world is so obscure that it was more than a week from the time this act was committed until the time it came to our attention as the possible work of dark wizards."

Although details are of course confidential, we have heard that the victim "shows signs of having been in some way killed by magic," and that a few articles stolen from his museum are both "earlier than recorded Muggle history" and "significant to certain wizards." Whether these wizards include He Who Must Not Be Named has not yet been confirmed. However, Aurors have said that a connection to him "seems, unfortunately, probable."

Harry swore when he reached the end of the article.

"It had to have been Voldemort," he said. "It makes sense. Southeastern Ireland? That's what Nott told him. And...predating recorded Muggle history..." He felt his heart sink as he spoke.

"Hyrule's history," Hermione whispered. He nodded.

"Ganondorf."

Having received some news, even if it was bad, lifted Harry slightly out of the pit into which he had sunk. After all, it wasn't that bad; if they knew what Voldemort was doing, then that was the first step towards stopping him. The Order and their allies now had motivation to act, and so Harry himself was driven. The thoughts which occupied most of Harry's mind were still rather depressing, it was true, but he was at least doing other things as well while he mulled. In an attempt to distract himself, he devoted a great deal of time to homework, making it his goal to finish it before the New Year, so that he would have time to relax.

On Christmas Eve, three days after the *Daily Prophet* article, he decided to stop until after Boxing Day, and so he had to return two

books that he had borrow from Professor McGonagall on Untransfiguration, a concept that still eluded his full comprehension. When he arrived at her office, however, he heard voices, and paused outside the door. What confused him most was the fact that he was sure one of the voices was that of Snape.

"...to tell him what's going on."

"Honestly, Severus, if you take such an interest in this, why don't you take it up with Albus yourself?" McGonagall asked, sounding exasperated.

"You know he wouldn't believe me," Snape retorted. "Any matter concerning Potter, he won't believe me for a second. Just because he thinks the boy should be kept informed of every small detail—"

"Severus, I must admit that I agree with Dumbledore on this matter, and that Potter should be enlightened on this information."

There was a bang, as if Snape had slammed his fist down on the desk. "He is not a member of the Order!"

A scraping of a chair followed, and Harry was certain McGonagall had risen to her feet. "Why should that matter?! You know what he *is*, and it's something far more important than simply a member of the Order of the Phoenix!"

"These are *not* details we can risk handing over to children!" Snape hissed, and Harry heard something almost like desperation in his voice.

"It is not a detail, Severus," McGonagall replied coldly, "and he is hardly a child."

Snape didn't answer, and Harry heard footsteps approaching the door. He made to run away, but wasn't quick enough; he had gotten only a few feet before her office door opened and her sharp voice called, "Potter!"

Stopping in his tracks, Harry wondered fleetingly exactly how futile it would be to pretend he hadn't heard the conversation. The look of

outrage on Snape's sallow-skinned face as he appeared in the doorway after McGonagall answered this question.

"Yes, Professor?" Harry asked nervously, avoiding the potions master's eye.

To his surprise, McGonagall didn't sound at all angry when she asked, "Did you need something, Potter?"

"I came to return your book," he told her, holding it up as proof.

McGonagall nodded. "Thank you." Stepping out of her doorway, she added, "Come into my office for a moment. We need a word."

She and Snape exchanged warning glances as the latter swept into the hallway, though who was doing the warning and who was receiving it, Harry couldn't say. It might have been both. At any rate, McGonagall was quick to look away from Snape and close the door behind him.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Harry said, by way of beginning. "I didn't mean to overhear what you were saying. I just came to return the book, like I said..." He lay it on the desk as he spoke.

"I know," McGonagall replied curtly, passing him to sit behind her desk. "Frankly, I'm not at all bothered that you did hear. The conversation did concern you, after all, though I'm sure you gleaned that."

"Er... Yes, I did."

"I'm not sure how much you heard, but it doesn't really matter. I have a message for you from Professor Dumbledore, that's all. He would have delivered it in person, but...you know he sometimes has other obligations."

That was the roundabout way of saying that he was busy with official Order business, Harry assumed. "Yes, of course," he said, nodding.

"Well, he instructed me just to tell you this. You-Know-Who has become active again. You heard of the murder that was reported in the *Daily Prophet* yesterday?"

Harry nodded.

"And you've heard of a man named Ganondorf Dragmire?"

Harry found that this name already inspired more fear in him than any other; he knew what to expect from the lord of the Death Eaters, but the King of Evil was an unknown force. For the same reason that most people feared the iconic force that was Lord Voldemort, Harry dreaded King Ganondorf Dragmire. He nodded again, a lump of anxiety in his throat.

"The two events are not unrelated. Dumbledore suspects that Lord Voldemort plans to ally himself with his ancestor, Ganon, in order to seize control of the Triforce of Courage. But the Headmaster seemed confident that this wouldn't strike you as much of a surprise."

"No," Harry admitted, feeling a lead weight settle in the region of his stomach, "it doesn't. But how would that happen? How can Voldemort...You-Know-Who... How can he be allied with Ganon?"

McGonagall pursed her lips before saying. "There was a minor comment in the article on the murder which roused Professor Dumbledore's suspicions," she said slowly, rather as if she was trying to understand what she was saying even as she spoke. "It mentioned that the victim showed signs of being murdered by magic."

"Yes," Harry said. "So that just means Avada Kedavra, doesn't it?"

"That's the question. Does it? Or did the Aurors who released the statement make a point of avoiding specific references to the cause of death because they don't know what it was?"

When she spoke, it sent a chill of realization up Harry's spine. In his dreams, Ganondorf often used magic quite unlike anything he had ever seen or heard of. Did that mean...?

"Professor Dumbledore didn't explain the details to me, though I'm sure he knows them," McGonagall went on in her usual businesslike tone. "He has simply asked you to meet him at sunset on 3 January, just outside the main entrance to the castle. I think he will inform you then of the full situation."

It sounded like an unusually intentional meeting place and time. Dumbledore more often met people whenever they had a moment, in his office, or wherever they happened to be. Something as structured and precise as this sounded to Harry like something out of an international espionage novel.

He gave a short nod. "I'll be there."

So it was that for the next days, Harry was much more active in his life, though thoughts of what surely was happening in the world still ate at the back of his mind. When he woke up on Christmas morning, however, he managed finally to find something that put him firmly in a good mood.

It was a pillow to the head that roused him, and when he opened his eyes he saw that Ron had chucked it from his own bed and was now reaching for the pile of wrapped parcels at its foot.

"Presents!" he said enthusiastically.

Harry, spotting his own pile, sat up sharply and threw Ron's pillow back before grabbing the first of the gifts.

Hermione had given him a book entitled *Great Quidditch Strategies of Our Time*, which he knew would come in quite useful in his role as captain. From Ron, he received a box of Weasleys' Wildfire Whizbang Fireworks along with a note in Fred or George's handwriting that said, "Have some fun with your cousin with these!" ("Oops...I was supposed to put their names on the card, too!" Ron said when he saw the package.) There was also the usual fudge from Mr and Mrs Weasley; he slipped the lumpy blue jumper on over his pyjamas. A few members of the Order of the Phoenix had given him presents, too, including Remus' gift of what looked like quite an old book. Inside, Harry read in curly handwritten letters, *The Legacy of Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs*. Flipping through the pages,

he found that it was filled with instructions, explanations, and anecdotes of their best pranks and adventures. As he put it down, Ron said, "Hey—something fell out."

Sure enough, an envelope had slipped lightly from between the pages of the book onto Harry's lap. He picked it up and opened it, removing two pieces of parchment. He looked at the small note first; it was in Remus' handwriting.

Harry,

I received this a month or so ago. Consider it a Christmas present from your godfather.

A fresh wave of pain hit Harry in the stomach. He had been doing so well, coping with his life... He didn't want to think about Sirius, not now, not on Christmas, not while he was happy. But he had to.

Apprehensively, Harry looked at the other pieces of parchment. They were large, folded over several times to fit into the envelope, and as he opened them, another small note fell out.

"Harry..." Ron said slowly, no doubt spotting the fear in Harry's face as he glanced over the manuscript, which was written in complicated lettering and looked to be some sort of legal document.

The note was written in an unfamiliar, official-looking hand. Harry read it, curious despite his worry.

In light of the recent tragic death of Mr Sirius Alpha Black, it has fallen to me to be the executor of his will. As the last member of a very wealthy family line, Mr Black's assets were substantial, and are outlined more specifically in the last will and testament enclosed herewith. In accordance with his wishes, his considerable wealth, excluding the residence at Number 12, Grimmauld Place, London, is to be divided equally between his closest living friend, Mr Remus John Lupin, and the godson of whom he had legal custody and whom he therefore considered to be his heir, Mr Harry James Potter.

There followed the signature and certification of a wizard lawyer.

Harry reread the words, particularly the description of himself, particularly the one word that jumped out most—*heir*. In their last months together, Sirius had already made this will... He had already planned to give Harry half of his fortune... He had never mentioned it... But then, he hadn't planned on giving it to him so soon, and it wasn't a very easy topic to bring up casually.

"What's up, Harry?" asked Ron uncertainly.

Harry passed him in the note, and as he read it, Hermione entered the room.

"Happy Christmas," she said merrily. She was wearing a scarlet Weasley jumper with a stylized "H" on it and a pair of old jeans, Crookshanks was winding around her bare feet, and she held a book that was presumably a new gift. "Have you finished opening your—"

"Considered to be his *heir*?" yelled Ron suddenly, jumping up from the wrapping paper scraps and presents on his bed.

Hermione looked slightly affronted at being interrupted, but she forewent the lecture to give in to her curiosity.

"What's that, Ron?" she asked, frowning.

"One of Harry's Christmas presents," he answered, handing it to her. She read it with a speed that only she could manage, then handed it back to Harry with tears sparkling in her eyes.

"Oh...that's so..."

"Wild," Ron offered.

Hermione cast him a look. "I was going to say touching," she informed him, still sounding almost on the verge of tears.

"Well, yeah, that, too," Ron mumbled uncomfortably, looking at his pile of presents to avoid looking at her.

Harry as well didn't know what to say or do. Of course he was touched by Sirius' gift, but her would never be able to spend it without

feeling guilty, and it would be a horrible insult to his godfather's memory to refuse the money or even give it away... There was also the fact that he was quite sure Sirius hadn't meant for the money to come to him like this. Sirius was supposed to have lived to see Harry grow up, to see Voldemort fall, to see his best friend's son become a hero, and die decades after peace had been established, or natural causes or maybe a painless illness. He wasn't supposed to fall victim to an almost accidental murder, in the prime of his life, before Harry had even known his own destiny. Not for the first time, Harry found himself thinking angrily that this was not the way things were supposed to be. Good people were not supposed to suffer and die while evil ones gained strength and power.

"Are you okay, Harry?" came Hermione's voice quietly.

Snapping back to the present, Harry looked up from the note in his hand and said, "Yeah. I'm fine. Fine."

The world was not supposed to go on turning, indifferent, unchanging in its rhythms, without Sirius Black in it.

Dinner that night was its usual festive affair. Besides Harry, Ron and Hermione, there were five other students staying at the school, two Hufflepuffs and three Ravenclaws, one of whom was...

"Oh, hi, Luna," said Hermione unenthusiastically as Luna "Loony" Lovegood waved dreamily at them. Perhaps she had signed up to stay for Christmas, or perhaps she simply hadn't been paying attention when it was time to catch the train home.

"Hello," she said in her usual tone. "I hope you all had a nice Christmas."

They murmured that they had. "How was yours?" Harry asked politely.

"It was quiet," she said, sounding neither pleased nor upset but almost bored by the fact. "It usually is. Winter isn't a very active time for interesting creatures and phenomena. I suppose that's why I mostly end up just reading. Maybe I'll see you over the break some time."

And she strode away. Ron looked after her for a moment before shaking his head, and Hermione turned her attention to the dinner that was setting itself up, with an unconcerned air. Harry watched Luna go, wondering vaguely what made her tick, then sat down on Hermione's right.

"That girl is amazing," Hermione said. "She doesn't even know that everyone makes fun of her."

"Yes, she does," Harry corrected her. "She told me so last year."

Wide-eyed with horror, Hermione looked up at Harry. "She did? Oh, no! I knew it! Did she mention me? Does she think I'm horrible? She must—"

"No, she didn't," interrupted Harry. "She didn't seem to much care, to tell you the truth."

"Of course she cares," Hermione snapped wearily, sighing before turning her attention to a cracker she was pulling with Ron. It let off an explosive bang and released a large and very gaudy red necklace.

Dinner was made interesting, as usual, by the teachers, who relaxed their own standards of behaviour only once a year—perhaps it was because this was the once a year that they had as much to drink with their dinner as they liked. Hagrid was booming out Christmas carols, Sprout was giggling like a teenager at every joke Flitwick cracked, McGonagall was engaging everyone in conversation, Dumbledore and Sinistra were taking it in turns to try on all the ludicrous hats that had burst from the crackers, and Tonks was changing her appearance by the minute; Hermione laughed until she couldn't breathe when their new professor made her hair a large ball of colourful stripes like a clown's wig.

After dinner they all stayed up late reclining by the Gryffindor fire. They played chess and Gobstones, toasted marshmallows, broke in some of their new presents, and talked about everything from Quidditch to school to nothing in particular.

Not until he was lying in bed in the dark in the early morning hours did the omnipresent anxiety which had mysteriously melted away that

morning reappear in Harry's core. Though he didn't know what it sounded like, he could almost hear Ganondorf's deep, rolling laugh...blending in contrast with Voldemort's high, cold one...

All the students who had gone away for Christmas would return on 6 January, but that was not the next significant date on Harry's personal calendar. What he awaited, the only thing he could think about, was 3 January.

The day after New Year's Day, he spent his time doing the homework he had all but given up on after Christmas, which he had meant to have done by this time. That night, he sat up in his dormitory, wide awake in the early hours of the morning. He had been unable to sleep, not because of nightmares, but because of worry that he would have them. And so he was curled up on a window seat by his bed, leaning his chin into the heel of his palm and looking at the moon.

It was getting fuller, drowning the dark night in brightness. Harry felt sure that the night when Remus made his transformation from kind, intelligent, moral man to vicious, blood-thirsty monster would fall on the night that he would meet Dumbledore for some mysterious business...

He stared so long at the still lake, reflecting the luminous ball of the spectral moon, that for a moment he thought he saw a figure walking across the surface as softly as light...clad in green, bright blond hair, blue eyes set in its pale face...and another being walking beside him...wearing a billowing, pale dress, with waves of golden hair and the same expressive eyes, staring up at him... They smiled, and raised their hands to wave in greeting...

A sudden, soft breeze slipped through a crack in the window frame and tickled Harry's arm. He jerked, and realized that he had fallen asleep sitting before the window.

Of course. Link and Zelda wouldn't be floating like ethereal spirits over the surface of the lake. It was still, black and deep. But Harry couldn't help glancing at it again as he climbed into bed.

Chapter Seven—Renaissance

What was Link like?

The History of Hyrule had given an impersonal, professional summary of his life, addressing the death of his mother, his awakening of the Sages, and both of his marriages in the same expository tone. But who was the Link who had been best friends with Saria? Who was the Link who was in love with Malon? He must have had children; who was Link the father? What did his voice and his laugh sound like? How did he behave and carry himself? The most Harry had really seen of him was silent, solemn moving images in a textbook—but in a dream, Harry had seen a young boy dance all night long and fall asleep on the forest floor, gazing up at the stars. He had heard Link's childish speech and felt Link's childish gait as though they were his own.

The sunlight spilling across the open Astronomy textbook in Harry's lap was turning orange. He was sitting in the common room by the grate, though it was empty at the moment, next to Ron and Hermione. The former was trying to distract his girlfriend by playing with her hair and trying to kiss her hand whenever she attempted (half-heartedly and still smiling) to swat him away. But Harry's attention was on the fact that the sunlight over the images of the planets was darkening and dying. It was setting. The moon was rising. Finally...

Abruptly, Harry grabbed his textbook and backpack and shoved the former into the latter before swinging it over his shoulder and heading up to his dormitory.

"Hey, Harry, where are you going?" asked Ron, pausing momentarily in distracting Hermione when Harry returned to the common room seconds later. She looked up as well, apparently more thrown by the fact that her boyfriend had stopped being annoying than anything else.

"Meet Dumbledore," Harry answered briefly. He strode out of the room before either one could ask more questions, with the determination of someone who was finally going to achieve what he

had been waiting for...even though he had no idea what he was heading towards.

The castle was, unsurprisingly, deserted as Harry made his way to the Entrance Hall. Yet walking outside still felt like entering peace. It felt more alive than the indoors, probably because of the brightness of the full moon. In a way, Harry could understand why this night would bring the wolf out in Lupin; it could bring out the animal in anyone, like the pull of the tide.

"You're here already, Harry. Good. I had worried you might forget."

Dumbledore had arrived, and stood in the doorway of the castle. The first thing Harry noticed was that he was dressed differently. He had never taken notice of Dumbledore's wardrobe before, but the change was conspicuous; the Headmaster was wearing a simple robe of blue velvet. Behind him floated a cauldron and a trunk, and Harry could see the hilt of the Master Sword protruding from its open lid.

"Of course I wasn't going to forget," Harry said. "What's going on, Professor?"

"I will explain everything. But first, take this."

He held out his arm, and Harry saw a substantial length of green velvet draped over it. Being a Gryffindor, Harry was naturally repulsed by the colour at once. Dumbledore must have seen the look on his face, because he explained, "Green is the colour of the Triforce of Courage. Oddly, red is the colour of the Triforce of Power."

"And blue is the colour of the Triforce of Wisdom?" Harry guessed, based on the colour of Dumbledore's robes. That one fit, he supposed, since Ravenclaws were known for their intelligence, but the other two seemed backwards.

"That's right. So I shall wear blue tonight, and you should be wearing green."

Harry obeyed, slipping off the plain black robe that he wore over his school clothes and pulling the heavy green one over his shoulders in its place. It was rather long, and he wasn't sure if he felt like an ancient druid about to embark on a legendary journey, or simply a sixteen-year-old boy in robes too big for him.

"Take this as well," Dumbledore added, holding out the ruby-studded Master Sword. It looked heavy in his hands, and Harry was surprised at how light and comfortable it felt in his own grip, like it belonged there. He hadn't noticed that when he'd been using it to fight for his life. Now that he thought about it, it was very strange that he had been able to think clearly enough to wield such a deadly weapon when he had thought he was about to die. It was like instinct. Like holding this sword was something he was born to do.

Which, he now realized as he looked at his reflection in the shining blade, it was.

"Are we ready?" he asked, feeling he ought to say something.

Dumbledore looked at Harry with his deep, blue eyes a moment longer before answering, "Yes."

He began to walk down the stairs, followed by the floating cauldron and trunk, and Harry followed, "Sir... What exactly are we doing?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," Dumbledore said. "I haven't yet told you. Though I suspect you can probably guess?"

He looked at Harry for confirmation, and received a blank look.

"I see. In that case, I'll start at the beginning. As McGonagall may have told you, Voldemort was not the sole figure behind the mysterious death of that Muggle in Ireland."

"Yes," Harry said, finding his mouth suddenly dry. "She mentioned... Ganondorf... That Voldemort wants to ally himself with Ganon."

Dumbledore nodded slowly.

“But how can he do that, sir?” Harry blurted. The question had been burning at his mind, and he wanted an answer. “Ganon’s sealed away. How can Voldemort...?” He let his voice fade away, the silence finishing the question for him.

“I would think the answer to that would be obvious, Harry,” Dumbledore said softly, glancing in Harry’s direction. “He must simply break the seal.”

Harry felt as if he had been punched in the stomach. “He can do that?”

“Are there seven Sages in power?”

“No...”

“Then yes, as the heir to Ganondorf’s legacy, he can. However, he did it in a way I must admit I was not expecting, though I can guess now why he chose the route he did.

“You see, Harry, there are two ways to bring back those suspended in time—either as bodies, or as souls. A body can come back at any time, and the spell to do so is much simpler. However, bodies are weaker. They are not immortal and their magic is not as strong. Physically, however, they are much stronger than the alternative, which would be the soul.

“Souls, or spirits, are immortal, far more resilient and enduring than bodies. Ghosts are souls, for example, but not complete ones. Pure souls are so close to the divine world that their magical powers are truly remarkable. Even Muggle souls have natural magic, but their material bodies inhibit it while they live. However, souls are physically weaker, and more difficult to bring across dimensions, as they are controlled by natural forces, especially the moon. This is most obvious in lycanthropy, but all humans feel the tug of the earth and the celestial bodies upon their souls.”

“I thought...” Harry began uncertainly. Trying again, he explained, “Last year, when Firenze taught Divination, he said that little human things like that weren’t important to the planets.”

"It is true that minor daily events in human life are insignificant to the universe," Dumbledore agreed. "But the changes of the universe are significant to us. Besides that, the great movement of the essence of every sentient being is hardly a little human event."

He paused to smile at Harry before continuing.

"I believe that Lord Voldemort chose to raise Ganondorf's body instead of his spirit, hurrying his plans because of the knowledge you have gained about Hyrule. In fact, I would go so far as to say that I *know* it, based on the evidence I have seen. But we will find out tonight if I am correct...if our spell works..."

And Harry realized what they were going to do.

"We're bringing back Link and Queen Zelda?" he breathed. "Their souls?"

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed, gazing up at the full moon. "Exactly as they were at the moment they fulfilled their destinies, when they defeated Ganondorf for the first time and sealed him away. Now that Voldemort has begun the process that will end in Ganon's return, so can we summon Link and Queen Zelda. They will be able to use their powerful magic against Ganondorf. Queen Zelda, while she did have some training in hands-on combat, was better known for her incredible magical capacity. She was gifted in all regions of witchcraft when she was alive, honing her inborn talents to perfection, and as a soul, she will have powers close to those of a goddess. Link, while he may have been just as magically powerful, does not have such refined skills in that area. His magic is largely combative, self-taught and fluctuating. He, however, will have the Master Sword at his side, and his skill with that weapon and others is unrivalled.

"With any luck, this will be the last time they will walk the mortal earth. It has been over nine thousand years since their journey began. It is time for them to return to the arms of the goddesses, and rest."

There was a long silence as they continued to walk along the grounds, passing the shore of the lake. Though it seemed too reverent a moment to break, Harry did still have one question.

“Professor Dumbledore, sir... I was wondering, what exactly are we going to be doing?”

He thought he heard the Headmaster give a slight sigh before answering.

“I am sure that when I describe for you the procedure of the spell,” he began, “it will evoke some explicit memories for you. I am equally sure that they are memories you would rather never have earned, and may cause you to distrust this spell. I ask, however, that you trust me.”

Here he looked to Harry for confirmation.

“I trust you,” said Harry immediately. “I’ve never... I mean, I know you’re one person I can always trust.”

Dumbledore’s weary sigh was noticeable this time, though he looked straight ahead of him.

“As much as I appreciate your endorsement, I must remind you that I am a mere mortal, capable of mistakes and...errors in judgment.”

These words caused an unpleasant jolt in Harry’s stomach; it was one of Dumbledore’s errors in judgment that had, in large part, cost Sirius his life.

Rephrasing his statement, Harry said carefully, “I trust that...even though you might sometimes be wrong, it’s usually the safest bet to follow your plans.”

“Thank you, Harry. Now, to the spell itself...”

“Each resurrection—they aren’t really resurrections, of course, since the people in question aren’t dead, but we’ll use the term for simplicity’s sake—each one will require the base potion in this

cauldron, and three other items: one from their identities, one from their destinies, and one from their families. The first two are simple to procure. For Queen Zelda's identity, I have a sample of a powder used by the Sheikah people to perform their magic. She was not a Sheikah herself, but was well-trained in their arts. You read about the years she spent in disguise, of course? Helping Link on his quest to defeat Ganondorf?"

Harry nodded. To escape Ganon's rule, the princess had lived under the identity of Sheik, a young man of a race called the Sheikah, the shadow people, a mysterious culture that had already been dying out at that time. Zelda's nursemaid, Impa, was a real Sheikah, and instructed her in their ways. For the seven years in which Link had been sealed away, and for the majority of his journey, she had spent every moment in this guise, a warrior, not even revealing herself to him. Harry could understand why anything to do with the Sheikah people would be very close to Zelda's heart.

"And for Link's, I have obtained from one of the greenhouses a small sprout from a genus of tree native to his home forest. Deku Trees are very rare these days, I believe there are less than one hundred left in the world, but Hogwarts was recently lucky enough to acquire a few seeds... But that is another matter." He gave a small laugh before continuing.

"For their destinies, I think you can guess that the Master Sword will serve for Link. Queen Zelda's artefact is this."

From the neck of his robes, Dumbledore pulled out a pendant on a golden chain. It looked like a simple upside-down V at first glance, but as Harry stared at it, he found that the gold it was made of did seem to be much more unnaturally bright than anything he had ever seen before, and it was somehow mesmerizing...

"This is a piece of the Triforce of Wisdom itself," Dumbledore said. "The Triforce of Courage was divided into eight pieces, and the last record we have of them is the tale of how Link IV, Hero of Winds, gathered them from the bottom of the ocean and united them within himself. After the quest, he is reported to have lost them again, and since then, no one has seen them. I personally believe that they

remain united, within the spirit of the first True Hero, and will find his heir when the time comes for them to move on to the next generation.”

He didn’t look directly at Harry as he spoke, but his meaning was clear.

“The Triforce of Wisdom, however, was only divided into two pieces. One, like the Triforce of Courage, has not been seen since Hyrule sank beneath the waves. But the other had been in Tetra’s family for generations, and so she retained it, passing it on through her family. Godric Gryffindor possessed it, and gave it to his daughter. So it has come to me.

“So far, this spell doesn’t sound like anything you would have any reason to be uneasy about, does it, Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

“No,” Harry agreed, shaking his head.

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. “It is the third item that I... Well, I will let you judge. You and I are their families, Harry. We must contribute our blood.”

As he spoke, they arrived at their destination—the edge of a graveyard on the far side of the castle, where students rarely ventured. Harry himself had only glimpsed it in passing through castle windows, but had never been here; few people had, since there was nothing in this area worth visiting.

Instantly, he understood Dumbledore’s warning.

But this was not, he told himself, the magic of Death Eaters bringing back the leader they held in god-like esteem to continue his quest for world domination and genocide. This was Dumbledore. This was the Triforce. Ignoring the knot that had appeared sickeningly in his stomach, he simply nodded shortly. He would have liked to say something, but his voice was firmly lodged in his throat.

“First, I will raise Queen Zelda,” Dumbledore went on, half looking at Harry as he put his attention to the task at hand. The small,

dark shapes of the tombstones, illuminated by the moon to look like nocturnal demons rising from unholy sleep, were strewn before them. Yet, somehow, as he looked at them closely, Harry found no malice in their disturbing shapes; instead, he found himself almost pitying those who were lost to this world and had their final resting places in the forgotten and untamed grass of Hogwarts Castle. Who were they?

With a wave of his wand, Dumbledore lowered the cauldron and trunk softly to the ground. "You can watch," he explained, "and copy me. Would you light a fire beneath that cauldron, please?"

As Dumbledore opened the trunk and began to lay out the articles within, Harry placed the Master Sword among them. He then pointed his wand at the base of the cauldron and said, "*Lacarnum inflamarae.*" Pale green flames shot from the end of his wand and began to crackle quietly, not burning the grass around them. Peering into the large, pewter bowl, Harry saw what looked like nothing more than water, rippling gently from its recent movement; he was sure, however, that it was a highly complex potion.

"Take this, Harry," Dumbledore was saying now, handing him a piece of parchment. "These are the words to the spell which you will say. Now, stand back."

Harry obeyed, stepping away from the area where Dumbledore stood. The Headmaster, now looking like something far greater than simply a professor, much more like the epically powerful wizard he was, stood before the cauldron. It was already beginning to hiss and bubble.

Dumbledore held up a small, purple velvet pouch. "*Essence of shadow, you will renew your caster.*"

He upturned the pouch, and out of it flowed a pure white powder, as brightly shining as snow and as light and fine as dust. The potion in the cauldron turned a shade of violent blue that Harry had only seen once before, and he found his heart beating quickly against his ribs.

"*Gold of wisdom, you will revive your possessor.*"

He slipped the Triforce pendant off of his neck and held it out briefly before dropping it, shimmering in the air, into the cauldron. Harry didn't hear it hit the bottom, but he knew what was coming next, and sure enough, the potion turned a blood red that illuminated the night around it.

Now Dumbledore stood poised with a dagger in his hand, its tip looking particularly deadly in the light of the full moon. Harry's own blood was pounding in his ears dizzyingly; he still had a small scar in the crook of his right arm where Wormtail had cut into him a year and a half before...

"Blood of the descendant, you will resurrect your ancestor."

Without so much as flinching, Dumbledore slid the sleeve of his robe up past the elbow and brought the knife towards where the blood flowed close to his skin, pale and ghostly—

Harry closed his eyes, and heard nothing until the potion hissed furiously and turned blinding white against his eyelids, backlit so they glowed. It was all so horrifyingly familiar—but he had promised to trust Dumbledore—he *did* trust Dumbledore—

He looked.

The potion was spitting countless white-hot, brilliant sparks, like thousands of stars adding themselves to the night sky. Dumbledore had backed away slightly, but he was watching the process unblinkingly. Everything was inky blackness except for him, standing there as an eerily lit silhouette, and the Master Sword, near Harry's feet, catching the light on its mirror-like blade so that it emitted a dancing internal luminosity of its own.

Smoke began to billow from the cauldron, thick clouds of shimmering, bright steam that reached out to embrace and smother the world. Squinting through it, Harry saw what was happening at the centre of all the magic.

A figure was forming in the cauldron; the sparks were swirling in combination with the steam to form a body. The shape was

becoming more defined, more solid, beginning even to take on colour...

The light of the potion was fading, its sparks dying, but the figure remained. In the absence of the distracting pyrotechnics, Harry could see her more clearly.

She was tall and slender, her skin pale and smooth, her hair gently hanging in waves and curls of silky blonde halfway down her back, her eyes bright blue and deep; her dress was in shades of pink silk, adorned with insignias of power and wealth, but its gold details around the shoulders and waist were unusually suggestive of armour and physical strength; she wore golden earrings in the shape of the Triforce, and atop her head sat an elaborately worked and fitted crown of gold set with a large ruby that made her prestigious position unquestionable. She looked like an idealized image of a goddess from classical mythology, beautiful in the truest sense of the word, and somehow unreal; Harry realized presently that this was because she was very slightly translucent, and almost emitted a pale glow. Only one thing about her was fully solid—around her neck hung the Triforce of Wisdom pendant on its gold chain.

“Queen Zelda,” Dumbledore said, and she turned her head to face him. “Welcome to the new world. I am your blood descendant. My name is Albus Dumbledore.”

The queen’s face remained impassive as he spoke, and she blinked calmly. Harry found himself wondering if she had understood a word of this; what if the Hylians’ souls didn’t speak English? Then, to his surprise and relief, she answered.

“Albus Dumbledore... And you have brought me here?”

Her voice was delicately feminine and cultured, but with very clear undertones of strength and authority, just like her attire. She looked every bit the part of a legendary monarch, and moved with grace as she stepped out of the cauldron. Harry remembered reading in *The History of Hyrule* that Link had had to rescue her, but somehow she didn’t appear in any way to be the type of person that would ever have needed rescuing. Being disguised for seven years as a Sheikah man seemed more like her style.

Zelda was now looking around the grounds curiously. "Where are we?" she asked, gazing over the graveyard. "And where's Link?"

"Where we are will take time to explain," Dumbledore told her as she continued to look around; Harry saw her eyes lock onto the massive castle of Hogwarts. She looked unimpressed, however, since of course she had grown up in such a place. It was just another building to her. "As for Link, he is not yet here, but we are about to bring him as we raised you. Allow me to introduce the young man of Link's bloodline." He nodded towards Harry.

Zelda cast her imperial gaze on him and looked him over thoughtfully. She had the same penetrating eyes that Dumbledore did. After taking Harry in, she smiled, looking far more warm and personable when she did so.

"What's your name?" she asked, stepping towards him, and this time Harry heard the youth in her voice. From closer up, he saw that she couldn't have been older than eighteen, if even that. His own age, really, even if she didn't act it.

"I'm Harry Potter," he answered, trying to smile back. It was difficult, though. She just seemed so completely flawless, almost divine, that it was intimidating. He felt as though he should bow or shake her hand, but wasn't sure which, so he simply shifted uneasily on the spot.

Zelda reached out one of her own hands and said, "Hi. Nice to meet you, Harry. You probably already know, but I'm Queen Zelda Hyrule I. Just call me Zelda."

"Okay," said Harry, pleasantly surprised that she could so easily switch to being a more informal teenager. Her handshake felt like a normal human's, not insubstantial at all; in fact, it was very firm, more athletic than he would have expected, and didn't quite fit into the rest of her elegant image. There was definitely more to her than history had ever let on.

"Well, then, Harry," said Dumbledore, "I think you have a job to do."

“Right,” agreed Harry, looking down at the paper in his hand and then folding it into his pocket. “Is everything ready?”

Dumbledore nodded. Harry picked up the Master Sword from the grass in his right hand, and accepted with his left the small Deku Tree the Headmaster offered him. Approaching the cauldron, Harry held this out and spoke the first words he had read on the parchment.

“Limb of the homeland, you will renew your native.”

He dropped it into the potion, heart pounding, and watched the liquid turn blue. Everything was silent, but he hardly noticed. He could only hear the rhythm of his own wordless thoughts.

“Weapon of destiny, you will renew your warrior.”

He thought he heard Zelda let out a soft gasp as he raised the Master Sword and let it slip into the potion, which instantly became vivid scarlet. He then lifted from the grass the dagger which Dumbledore had used. His blood was barely visible on the tip, and Harry wiped it clean against his robe before he spoke again.

Shaking, he extended his left arm over the cauldron, pulling back the fabric of his robe, and managed to say, *“Blood of the descendant, you will resurrect your ancestor.”*

He bit his lip to keep himself quiet as he lay the blade next to one of his own blue veins, full of blood... it was like those detentions where he had been forced to carve words into his own skin... how had Wormtail managed to sever his own hand?

In one quick, short, painful move, Harry jerked the edge of the dagger across his skin. Blood welled up instantly, and he watched as the first drop left a bright streak on his skin, suspended itself momentarily, then fell into the potion that began to hiss and spit like acid. He stepped back right away, letting his robes fall over the small cut before clutching it tightly. The worst was over, and the initial shock of pain was gone.

Harry avoided looking at the potion as it underwent the same sparking fury that had brought Zelda here, instead turning his

attention to his arm. The injury was, of course, minor enough that it could hardly be called such a thing, but he just wanted something to focus on. Next to him, he could hear Zelda breathing audibly in apparent fear and anticipation. This more than anything else made him dare to look up.

Sure enough, a new figure was forming; sparks and light and steam were gathering into a shape that was distinctly different from Zelda's. As the light faded away a second time, Harry saw a young man roughly the same height as the queen, his vastly blue and deep eyes identical to hers, his hair the same pure blond. He was built of solid muscle, dressed not in the armour of medieval knights but a basic green tunic over a full-length white bodysuit, with only gauntlets of gold protecting his forearms; other than those and the simple shield across his back, he apparently relied on his own skill to keep from getting himself killed in battle. His body looked tanned and weathered, as though he spent his days doing physical work outdoors, and his simple clothes, the tunic and matching hat, and brown leather boots that buckled just below the knee, reflected this. The only non-functional details of his appearance were the small silver hoop earrings in each of his ears, which didn't look at all out of place; he was otherwise such the definitive image of masculine strength that jewellery didn't detract from this impression. He was just barely translucent, giving him an aura of ghostliness, but across his back in a blue and gold sheath was the very real Master Sword. It completed the image of him as the ultimate fighter, the deadliest being in the history of the world, unmatched in his strength and courage. His face was grave, and almost frightening; he looked as though he could and would easily and quickly lay into anyone or anything suspicious, and Harry shrank back slightly, not wanting to be the first to speak to this god-like man. He hoped Dumbledore would volunteer something, but—

“Link?” came Zelda's voice.

Blinking, the figure standing in the cauldron turned to face the direction from which he had heard the queen's voice. As soon as he recognized Zelda, his demeanour changed entirely at the speed of light.

“Zel!” he shouted with a loud laugh, and jumped nimbly from the cauldron. She let out a laugh of her own and clapped her hands, childishly hopping on the spot as Link ran the few steps towards her. He swept her up clear off the ground in a tight bear hug, spun her around, and placed her back down. They were both beaming, clearly delighted in their reunion.

“Oh, let me look at you!” said Zelda, holding Link by his shoulders out at arm’s length. “You look great,” she said fondly, beaming at him. “Like you did in your Hero of Time days.”

“Aw, thanks,” Link said with a grin. “You sure look awesome, too. This is how I always think of you, all decked out to save Hyrule with me.”

“This is how I always think of me, too,” Zelda agreed, looking herself over. “Before I had three kids.”

“Before we were even married,” Link observed, inspecting his own newly formed hands. “Back when we were practically kids ourselves... Man, does this feel good!” He stretched his arms over his head like a cat who had just woken up, then turned, smiling inquisitively, to Harry and Dumbledore. “Hi,” he said cheerfully. “Who might you be?”

Harry realized his mouth was hanging open, and closed it. He was completely stunned. Far from being an impressively stern and domineering warrior, Link was quite simply the most energetic, warm and genuine person Harry had ever seen. Though he looked to be roughly the same age as Zelda, his late teens, he had the vibe of a typically playful young boy, and Harry could easily imagine him running wild in the forest with his friends; his smile and laugh were both charming and contagious, and there was no doubting casual good looks. He clearly brought out the fun side of Zelda as well, and it was no wonder that she was so happy to see him again. Anyone would be.

There was something odd about him, though. Something that nagged at Harry...

Zelda performed the introductions. "Oh! This is Albus Dumbledore," she said, indicating him. "He brought me here. And this is Harry Potter, who brought you."

"We are your descendants," Dumbledore explained, extending a hand. "I am Zelda's, and Harry is yours."

Link shook Dumbledore's hand heartily, saying, "Pleased to meet you," then took Harry's and laughed, "So you're my great-great-great grandson or something? Probably a few dozen more 'great's in front of there, I guess."

"Er...yeah," Harry agreed, smiling uncertainly. Just as Zelda left him unsure how to act, so did Link, but for different reasons.

Clapping him on the shoulder, Link pulled Harry into an unexpected sort of masculine one-armed hug and handshake, saying, "It's great to see that my family's still around."

Harry was left rather bewildered and embarrassed by this affectionate action, even more so when Link ruffled his hair paternally after releasing him; Zelda gave a stifled giggle at the sight of his scruffiness and blankly confused face, placing her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing harder. Apparently this was their dynamic; he acted, and she reacted. They would probably bicker like siblings. Yet somehow, Harry still couldn't help thinking that the Hero of Time was definitely someone he liked to be able to call family.

"Let's go up to the castle," Dumbledore said. "I need to explain our situation."

"Of course," Zelda agreed, returning to her regal and dignified stature. Link, too, stood up straighter and instantly became as business-like and severe as he had always been depicted in the illustrations and portraits of him which Harry had seen.

"What's the situation?" he asked swiftly. "Ganondorf?"

"In part," Dumbledore told him. "I'll explain everything."

As the four of them walked to the castle, Dumbledore told Link and Zelda the history of Voldemort's quest for power. His was the only voice until they had nearly reached his office, at which point he had reached the tale of Voldemort's fall, and the deaths of Harry's parents.

"You're an orphan?" Link interrupted in a strangely suppressed voice, glancing at him.

Nodding, Harry said, "I didn't even know I was a wizard until I turned eleven."

Link regarded him seriously. "I know how you feel," he said simply.

They looked at each other a moment longer in silence, before Link pulled his eyes away from Harry's to focus on Dumbledore again and asked, "What happened after that?"

"The similarities between the two of you do not end there," the Headmaster informed him. "When Harry arrived at Hogwarts for the first time... Chocolate."

"What—Oh."

Neither Hylian so much as batted an eye as the gargoyle leapt out of the way, and simply followed Dumbledore up to his office as he went on to explain what had occurred since Harry had started school. The story of these accomplishments greatly fascinated both Link and Zelda, who took in every word eagerly, and occasionally shot him an impressed and proud smile. Seated in Dumbledore's office, Zelda leaned forward in her chair interestedly and Link leaned his own onto its back two legs, arms folded.

As they approached the end of the story of Harry's fourth year in school, Link actually stood up and paced the room restlessly, apparently angry at the injustice of it; upon hearing Dumbledore explain that Voldemort had used Harry's blood to regain his own life, he gripped Harry's shoulder protectively in his left hand.

It was this gesture that made Harry's stomach abruptly flip over so quickly that he felt dizzy. He suddenly realized what it was about Link's confident nature that had intrigued and bothered him from the moment they met—he was just like Sirius.

Harry looked up at Link; the resemblance wasn't a physical one in any way, but the similarities in their personalities and mannerisms were striking. They were both obvious and courageous fighters, intensely loyal, but they also had the same sense of humour and mischievousness. Link moved and acted like a blond version of Harry's godfather; how he stood with all his weight on one foot, or how he brushed his hair out of his face, or how he smirked irresistibly. His laughter, his pacing, and sitting with his chair tipped back, even the way he had given Harry that man-to-man half-hug...and now here he stood, doing the exact same thing that Sirius had done when he heard this story.

Keeping his attention under his control proved challenging for Harry now that he had to put his efforts into trying to ignore the reminder of his godfather that was boring into his mind in the form of the weight of Link's golden gauntleted hand on his shoulder.

After the story concluded, and Link and Zelda both knew exactly what was going on—that Voldemort had plans to raise Ganondorf in his corporal form in order to have the Triforce of Power on his side—Dumbledore finished by saying that they did not yet have a plan for counterattack.

“What I think it will come down to,” he said, “is that you two will once again have to do battle with Ganondorf, but this time, it will be completed. Since Harry, Voldemort and I are all in positions to inherit our respective pieces of the Triforce, you should be able to definitively destroy Ganondorf.”

“But we'll also destroy ourselves,” Zelda spoke up, “and pass our destinies along to you.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Precisely.”

“So what we're basically talking about doing is pulling Voldemort and Ganon into a six-person confrontation with the four of

us,” Link summarized, sounding like the military leader he was. “Then we’ll eliminate three of us, to simplify the matter down to one, current generation, and you can then resolve your own conflict either at the same time or at a later date.”

“And it will eventually come down to a one-on-one combat between Courage and Power,” Zelda added quietly, “as always.”

Again, Dumbledore nodded. “Until then, however, life must continue, for if we let Voldemort prevent us from living as we have always done, then we let him win. Harry, there are guest dormitories in Gryffindor Tower where Zelda and Link can stay. I’m sure they will want to get themselves settled in before the chaos of the new term returns and they have to get acquainted with everyone.”

“Oh,” said Harry, who had expected the Hylians to be kept something of a secret, though he didn’t know why he had assumed this. “Right. Of course, absolutely.”

“We’ll see you then, Albus,” Zelda said, inclining her head politely. Link imitated her move, but he very clearly had not grown up in a noble household.

When they had left Dumbledore’s office, Link asked, “Just out of curiosity, Harry... Why is there no one here? This castle’s huge, but it’s empty.”

“It’s the Christmas break,” Harry explained, realizing as soon as he spoke that they would have no idea what Christmas was. “I mean...Christmas is this holiday we celebrate in the winter, and so all the students go back home to their families. Almost all of them, anyway. I stay here with my friends, Ron and Hermione, and a couple of other people do, too.”

“Oh, your friends are around?” said Zelda, smiling at him. “I can’t wait to meet them.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, looking at her thoughtfully, “I think you and Hermione will get along.”

“And who’s the other one?” asked Link. “Ron?”

“Yes.”

“Weird names.”

Zelda rolled her eyes. “You could have phrased *that* better.”

“What?” Link asked defensively. “It’s true! And they probably think our names are weird, too, right, Harry?” He turned to his descendant for support.

“Well...Zelda’s pretty normal,” Harry admitted truthfully. “But I’ve never heard of anyone called Link. It’s just an everyday word, not a name.”

“See, now you know how it feels,” said Zelda parentally, grinning at Link’s scowl.

He stuck out his tongue at her. She flicked his nose. He nudged her with his elbow. She poked him in the sensitive spot below his ribcage, then bolted, laughing.

“Yeah, you better run, Queenie!”

At over nine thousand years old, Harry thought as he grinned and hurried after them, they apparently still hadn’t grown up.

Chapter Eight—Confronting the Other Side

"Hey! Stop!"

Harry came to a halt at the Fat Lady's portrait, which Zelda had run directly past, Link following her closely. At his shout, however, both Hylians stopped in their tracks and turned to see what he was indicating.

"This is the way to the Gryffindor Tower," Harry explained, pointing to the portrait.

"Oh, really?" asked Link, intrigued. He and Zelda had ended their chase as quickly as they had started it, and walked back to where Harry stood. "Secret passage, huh?"

"Password?" asked the Fat Lady. Zelda raised her eyebrows.

"I've never seen a painting that talked!" she said.

"I have," Link scowled. "Or, more accurately, several paintings that came to life and tried to kill me."

Harry chose not to ask, and Zelda didn't look terribly concerned, either. There weren't many sorts of things that had never tried to kill Link at some point or another. The Fat Lady gave him a bewildered expression before turning back to Harry.

"Who are they?" she demanded. "They're not students, they're too old!"

"We're seventeen," said Zelda, sounding dignified but slightly hurt.

"Sort of," Link amended.

The Fat Lady opened her mouth to reiterate her protest, but Harry cut her off.

"They're with me. Antipodean Opaleye."

With a slightly grudging wave of her hand, the Fat Lady's portrait swung forward to reveal the entrance to the Gryffindor common room, and Harry entered, Link and Zelda just behind him.

Since it was still fairly early in the evening, Ron and Hermione hadn't yet gone to sleep. She had apparently talked him into doing some homework (a task he had been avoiding since the end of the term), and they now sat facing each other on a couch by the fireplace as she tried to explain the finer points of a new spell they were learning in Defence Against the Dark Arts.

"It's like..." she paused thoughtfully. "Oh, I know! It's kind of like the Furnunculus Curse."

"Really? I thought it looked more like..." Ron waved his wand experimentally.

"No, not the wand movement, the inflection on the incantation," Hermione corrected.

"I'm back," said Harry, by way of greeting.

"Oh, hi, Harry," Ron said casually, looking up with a small wave. He did a comical double take when he saw the two other people standing there, eyes bugging. Hermione had to turn all the way around in her seat to see what he was staring at. When she did, she let out a gasp. Harry laughed at their identical expressions of blank shock.

"Link, Zelda," he said, nodding towards his friends, "this is Ron, and this is Hermione."

Link waved. "Hey."

"Pleased to meet you," Zelda said with her trademark courteous smile.

"Yeah...hi," Ron said faintly. Harry suspected Hermione would have been growing jealous of the way he was looking at Zelda if not for the fact that she was looking at Link the exact same way.

"Nice to meet you, too," Hermione managed. Snapping her gaze onto Harry, she asked, "What's going on?"

Harry explained briefly what he and Dumbledore had done, and that the two Hylians were part of the battle against Ganondorf and Voldemort.

"So, until Dumbledore decides what to do next, they're going to be living here, in the guest dorms?" Hermione asked.

"Well, it's more than just that," Zelda pointed out. "We still have so much to learn about this world. I mean, we can't go charging into battle without knowing a thing or two about the time and place where we're fighting, and who and what we're up against."

"But for now, Dumbledore said we're pretty much just supposed to make ourselves at home," Link added.

"They're going to get a lot of questions when the new term starts," Hermione warned Harry as the three new arrivals took seats near the fireplace; Harry and Zelda took two of the free armchairs, and Link took the third seat on the couch, next to Hermione.

"Like who are they and what are they doing here," Ron offered. "What are you going to tell everyone?"

Harry shrugged. He hadn't given this much thought. "The truth, basically, I guess," he suggested. "Me and Dumbledore brought them here, and they came from Atlantis."

"We came from what now?" asked Link, raising a curious eyebrow in Harry's direction.

"Kind of a long story. It's just a really bad mistranslation of Zelda's name that people started using to refer to Hyrule."

"There's little stuff that's gonna make people wonder, too," Ron went on. "Like what's up with the ears."

"Ears?" Link echoed, looking at Hermione's as Zelda touched her own self-consciously. "Oh, yeah... You have Gerudo ears."

"But they don't have Gerudo skin," Zelda observed. "Does *everybody* look like you three?"

"Well, some people have different skin colours, but the ears are all the same," Ron explained with a shrug.

"I wonder why we're different," Link thought aloud.

"Hylians have long ears because they can pick up a greater range of sounds that way, over greater distances," Hermione volunteered in her usual textbook style, sitting up straighter to speak and looking mildly surprised that no one else knew this. "And in the cases of people with magical powers, this also grants them telepathy."

Link stared at Hermione, clearly surprised and impressed. "Ah," he said, "there you go."

He smiled, and Harry noticed that she blushed slightly as she smiled back. Ron tore his eyes off of Zelda long enough to scowl slightly, and Harry had to hide a grin. Link did seem like the type who could flirt without knowing it, as he would bet money Sirius had been as well.

Zelda half rolled her eyes before saying pointedly, "Why don't the three of you show Link and me and around the tower?"

"There's not much to show," Harry answered. "This is the common room, and the dorms are over there." He pointed to the two staircases on the far side of the room.

"Well, we should show them where they're staying, shouldn't we?" Hermione pointed out, looking at Harry as she rose to her feet. "You and Ron can show Link the boys' and I'll show Zelda the girls'."

"Yeah, okay."

"Sure."

"Good idea."

They left the common room, splitting up. As soon as they were out of earshot of the girls, Link asked Ron, "Are you and Hermione...?"

"Yes," Ron answered instantly. Narrowing his eyes in suspicion, he asked, "Why?"

"Just wondered. You seem like it. From my experience, you can always tell people that just click like that."

Ron continued to look doubtful, although Harry felt he was being paranoid. Link didn't seem to notice, but perhaps he did, because he added, "Zel always said me and Malon were like that."

"Malon?" Ron asked. "Your girlfriend?"

"Wife," Link corrected, "and the mother of my children."

"Your—What?!" Ron blurted. "But you're hardly older than us!"

Shaking his head with an expression of amusement at Ron's shock, Link corrected him, "I *look* seventeen. I'm actually nine thousand and something. And I was eighteen when I got married the first time, and about nineteen when I had my first daughter."

Harry and Ron exchanged a look; it was strange to hear someone their own age discussing his wife and kids, and even stranger to imagine being a husband and father so young.

They ended up discussing Link's life story more than anything else, relaxing in the guest dorm for a long story filled with action and interspersed with funny anecdotes. He told them how he spent his childhood in Kokiri Forest: "Mido hated my living guts. Of course, I later found out it was because Saria had a crush on me and he had a crush on her. He didn't believe me that we were just friends. And then, of course, he got everyone else hating me, too, because I was the one kid in the whole forest without a fairy partner. That was rough."

"You think that's bad, you should meet my cousin Dudley."

"Yeah, Dumbledore told us all about your family. But did Dudley ever frame you for murdering your own god?"

He went on to talk about his first adventure, searching for the three Spiritual Stones: "Princess Ruto was perfectly willing to give me the

sapphire I needed, but according to her people, that would make us engaged. She's not even my species! I agreed, though, because I had no choice, and then I disappeared for seven years."

"Oh, there's a *really* good plan."

"Hey, I was ten! It was either that or marry her! She was pretty mad when I came back, though..."

He painted a vivid picture of what life was like when he returned to Hyrule as a teenage after being sealed away for seven years: "I didn't think I would *ever* be an adult. I was a Kokiri, Kokiri don't grow. You can't even imagine how weird it is to wake up one day and just be grown up all of a sudden. In my head, I was still ten."

His quest to defeat Ganon the first time was action-packed and complex. He related stories about how none of his friends recognized him ("I think they thought I was dead or something, because they were all wondering what had happened to me. At least Mido felt bad for everything he did to me when I was a kid."), about being arrested by the Gerudo ("Don't ever let anyone tell you there's any shame in losing to a girl. Not if it's one of them, anyway. Some of them fought way better than me, and I was definitely not expecting that."), about the elusive Sheik who turned up to help him ("Of course, when he told me he was a *she*, and not just any 'she,' but *Zelda*, all I could think was, 'Oh, goddesses, I hope I never said anything I shouldn't have said in front of her.'"), and about the various demons and monsters he had battled ("They're mostly not too dangerous. Well, except Wallmasters, and Like Likes, both annoying as hell. And Redeads. Those'll kill you every time."), including the most challenging conflict he had ever fought, against a solid shadow of himself called Dark Link ("Besides the fact that he knew all my tricks, do you know how hard it is to slash at yourself with a sword in the neck, the stomach, the legs... It's a nightmare, killing yourself and living to tell the tale.").

Then he told them about his life after Ganon's fall, when Zelda had taken the throne. Specifically, he told them about his family, including his two daughters.

Saria II, named for the Sage of Forest, was born out of wedlock, named a princess, kidnapped as a toddler, and raised on the streets; when she was older, she found out her true identity and returned home to her family, but shortly thereafter she accidentally killed her cousin, Zelda's oldest daughter; when she grew up, she became the next Sage of Light, and even more shocking, married Ganon's adopted son.

Nathana was a demi-goddess, worshipped by the people of Hyrule along with Zelda's demi-god son, Danion, and another demi-goddess, a girl named Hanya; the three of them were normal kids at home, except that they aged more quickly than mortals, had magical powers almost equal to those of the goddesses, and once used those powers to obliterate the Gerudo race.

"Wow," said Ron, when he reached the end of the tale. "That's impressive."

Link nodded proudly. "Those are my girls. And your ancestors, Harry. Well—Saria is. Nathana ascended to the Sacred Realm as a deity, so she didn't have children."

Harry started in surprise. He hadn't thought of that as he had listened to Saria's long list of accomplishments. "Oh... Yeah, I guess that's true. Cool."

Ron let out a massive yawn as Harry spoke, and Link looked at them both with the same disapproving expression.

"You two should be asleep. Have you got school tomorrow?"

"No, not for three more days," Harry answered.

Glancing out the window at the moon, Link informed them sternly, "Still, it's past midnight."

"But it's not—" Ron began, but Link cut him off.

"No arguing. Bed."

As they trudged off to their own dorm, Ron muttered, "Shouldn't've got him talking about his kids. We got him into dad mode."

Harry supposed he should have expected it. The presence of the Hylians triggered more nightmares.

He was flying, rushing up at an uncontrollable speed through thousands of miles of what couldn't be air; it was far too dark, cold, thick and heavy. No, it was a liquid of some kind...water, he thought...no, it wasn't that, either...

Then Harry exploded to the surface, and realized that it wasn't thousands of miles deep, either. In fact, he was standing in liquid that didn't even reach his knees, in a large metal bowl.

How degrading, in a pathetic sort of way.

Looking up, he saw that he stood on a grassy cliff, overlooking crashing ocean waves. There was no one else here, except for one man standing before him. That is, he was almost a man. He looked too strange for Harry to be sure that the title of "man" could apply to him. His skin was unnaturally white, whiter even than that of the accursed Hylians, and his eyes were vivid red, like a Sheikah. He looked like a living skull, a hideous mutant; the only reassuring aspect of his appearance was that he didn't have the long, pointed ears of the foreign people, but the short, round ones of Harry's own race, the desert people. He also had the dignity of a royal. At least he was nobility, not like that brat of a so-called Hero of Time that had been Harry's downfall so many eons ago.

In one hand, the strange man held a long, thin stick that looked like it had been sleekly shaped into its current perfectly straight form. In the other, he picked up an ordinary rock from the ground. Touching it with the end of his strange stick, he said in a high, cold voice, "*Portus*."

The rock turned blue and vibrated briefly, before falling still and looking perfectly normal again. The skull-faced man looked at Harry and said, "Come with me. There is much for us discuss."

Before he could object, Harry found the man grabbing him by the arm. His protest died in his throat as he felt the strange sensation of a

hook pulling from behind his navel, forcing him forward in a swirl of colour.

When his feet hit the ground again, only moments later, they did so in what looked like a mansion, a house with heavy, dark and expensive-looking décor, lit dimly and giving off a similar burning vibe of dangerous power as that inside the crater of Death Mountain, an active volcano. He landed on the richly-carpeted floor so suddenly that he nearly fell over, and he growled with rage as he ripped his arm out of the grip of the other man, preparing a furious tirade against him.

Then he caught sight of a mirror...and he liked what he saw.

He was tall, strong, dressed in the armour of the kings of his people. The gem which designated him as a powerful and important figure glimmered in its setting on his dark brow beneath his fiery hair. He smiled widely, his teeth looking unnaturally white next to his tan skin; this was the body he had been born with, that he hadn't truly inhabited in who could say how many centuries. He looked like the power he was. He let out a low chuckle, and turned to face the man who had brought him here.

"Who are you?" Harry demanded in his deep, commanding voice. "Do you know how it is that I have come here?"

The red-eyed man merely smiled.

"You are Ganon," he said, "one of the greatest—perhaps *the* greatest—of my ancestors. I have returned you to your body after millennia of suspended animation, for I, like yourself, am endowed with greater powers than typical mortals...including the ability to escape death."

Harry rolled his information over in his mind before speaking again.

"So my line has reached you."

"I am the last of your descendants."

"And what is your name?"

The man paused before her answered, "Like yourself, I was given at birth a name that did not adequately express my power. So, just as you became known simply as Ganon, I am simply Lord Voldemort."

"Lord Voldemort," said Harry thoughtfully. "And you have brought me here to help you?"

Voldemort hissed.

"As often as you have been inhibited by a young boy who likes to imagine himself the saviour of the world, so too have I. It will take both of us to destroy the one who can only be the next destined True Hero."

Harry felt an anger that had been dormant for centuries swell within him at these words.

"Another Link," he growled disapprovingly. "Yes... he must be destroyed."

And as Ganon and Voldemort's enthusiastic rage rose, an intense pain seared across Harry's scar, reaching an agonizing pitch—

"NO!"

Harry woke abruptly, and found himself in his four-poster bed at Hogwarts, his entire body rigid. He slowly relaxed, but he could still feel terrified adrenaline surging through him. He tried to return his mind to the present place and time; only then did he notice that Ron had slept through his shout. Perhaps he was learning to ignore Harry's too frequent nightmares. Closing his eyes, Harry tried to focus on Occlumency so that he could do the same thing.

Think of nothing. Think of nothing. Think of nothing. Think of nothing.

Sleep refused to come peacefully. Though Harry never sank into a deep enough unconsciousness for Voldemort and Ganon's images to return to him, his confused thoughts did bring him a blur of other images.

Sirius was a young boy dressed in green, dancing in the forest at the full moon to James' ocarina music, with a wolf that Harry knew to be Remus bounding in the clearing as well and howling in tune to the forest melody. Laughing, he tumbled onto his back in the grass, and Harry jerked awake.

Moments later, sleep teased the edges of his awareness anew. Link stood before a stone door set in an arch on a raised dais. He played an ocarina song, and the door receded into nowhere, revealing a veil that hung over the now open stone arch. The silhouette of the Master Sword was visible through it, and Link approached the doorway, brushing the veil aside to step through it. Harry's heart leapt into his chest in panic, and his eyes shot open.

In the early hours of the morning, he decided once and for all that sleep was never going to come to him. He climbed out of bed silently, thinking he might sit in the common room and be alone with his thoughts.

As he entered the common room, however, he heard a voice.

"Hey...I thought I told you that you should be in bed."

Sitting in Hermione's usual chair by the fireplace, hands folded in his lap and hair hanging in his eyes, was Link. The dull glow of the dying fire gave his features a sinister and shadowy illumination as it half shone through him.

"I couldn't sleep," Harry said, dropping into his own chair. "I'm guessing you couldn't, either?"

"Souls don't really need sleep," Link told him, "but I was trying to rest. I just couldn't get comfortable, which is weird, considering that I've gone months without a proper bed before. This whole world is just so different, though, and I miss Hyrule... But never mind me. What kept you up?"

Harry hesitated to confess that something as simple as disturbing dreams were keeping him awake; then he remembered that Link had suffered from them as well.

"Nightmares," he admitted.

"Oh, really? About what?"

"About..." Harry paused. Which nightmare was more bothersome, the one about Ganon and Voldemort, or the ones about Sirius and Link?

"About you, actually," he confessed awkwardly when he had decided.

A slow, uneasy smile spread over Link's face, like someone who wasn't sure if he got a joke. "Me?" he asked, raising his eyebrows. "Do I scare you?"

"No," Harry answered. "But you do...remind me of...someone."

Now Link's expression reversed; he furrowed his brow and frowned. "You're not telling me the full story here."

Harry sighed. He didn't want to tell it, but he wanted Link to know it. "Well..." he began, "you're a lot like my godfather. Sirius Black."

"Oh, yeah? I'd like to meet him."

"You...you can't," Harry muttered, lowering his gaze. "He died—He was murdered—last June. I saw it happen."

Link was very still. "Oh, Farore...I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Harry told him, hoping to drop the subject. A moment later, though, he changed his mind. He hadn't yet vocalized his thoughts on his godfather to anyone, not even Remus. But he could talk to Link about them.

"It's more than just that," he sighed, rubbing his face. "You know what it's like to not have parents, to not have anyone. Sirius was in prison until I was thirteen for crimes he didn't commit, but he escaped, and so even though I met him, people were hunting for him, so I barely got to see him, and I couldn't even write to him without having to watch my back. I only knew him for two years, but he was the closest thing to a father I ever had, and...and then I lost him. Just before his name was cleared. Just before he could have gotten his life back."

Harry could feel Link's eyes upon him as he watched the glowing embers of the dying fire.

"You know," Link said slowly, "if everything goes according to plan here, I'm going to die soon."

Of course. Harry knew this on an intellectual level, but he hadn't really thought about what that meant. He blinked and looked up at the Hylian before him. Link's tone was strangely calm as he discussed his own inevitable death.

"Aren't you scared at all?" Harry asked slowly.

Link shook his head.

"How—I mean, why not?"

"Two reasons," Link answered, holding up as many fingers. "First, because I have the Triforce of Courage, which keeps me from being scared of anything." He paused to give a small smile before continuing. "Second, because I know what there is after death."

Harry's eyes widened. "How do you know that?"

"Again, a couple of reasons. Most of what I know comes from Zelda, because with her magic combined with the Triforce of Wisdom, there isn't much she doesn't know or hasn't seen. But I've also seen it myself. I've been there. It is possible to go to the world of the dead sometimes, but it takes powerful protective magic to ever come back."

Leaning forward in his chair, Harry appealed to him, "Tell me about it. Please."

Link hesitated. "I don't know if I'm allowed... Plus I only saw a small part of it..."

"I just want to know where Sirius is! You can't just tell me you know what's after death and then not tell me anything else! It's not like I want to know for myself or something, I want to know for Sirius! And my Mum and Dad, too! Please, Link, you have to tell me! You never

knew your mother, but you know where she is...you can't not tell me about mine."

Harry couldn't help noticing that Link was wearing a pitying expression. Normally Harry hated whenever anyone felt anything remotely like pity towards him, but in this case, he simply hoped that the appeal to emotion would move Link to speak.

"Okay," he finally relented, though there was a grudging undertone in his voice. "Do you want to go for a walk? Maybe grab a bite to eat?"

"I could use a drink, I guess," Harry consented. "We'll go down to the kitchens, and then you'll tell me everything?"

He looked, almost threateningly, at Link for confirmation.

"All right," he sighed, pulling himself up from his chair. Harry followed suit, satisfied.

As they made their way down to the kitchens, Link explained.

"Well, there's three...worlds, or dimensions, or planes of existence, or whatever you want to call them. Realms. One is this one, the Mortal Realm. Another is the world of the goddesses, the Divine Realm. The third is halfway between the two, joining them but belonging to neither. It's called the Sacred Realm.

"There are a few specific places where you can get into the Sacred Realm by following specific magical practices. Once you get there, though, you can't get back without very powerful magic, the kind that only the goddesses and the Sages and people like that have, which is much more than ordinary wizards. Ironically, if you don't have enough magic to get out, you also can't stay there, or else you'll die, because that world isn't designed for mortal habitation. So basically, don't go there unless you're sure you can take it. Now, I got into the Sacred Realm by pulling the Master Sword out of the Pedestal of Time and all that, and the goddesses immediately put me under Their protective power. Ganondorf also followed me in there, and that could have killed him, except that he quickly found and took hold of the Triforce. That couldn't give him enough power to survive in the Sacred Realm, but it did allow him to get out of it. He was one of the

most powerful wizards in the world to begin with, and with the Triforce of Power..."

Link paused, apparently lost in thought, then shook his head.

"Anyway, like I was saying, the rules of who can get in and out of the Sacred Realm are confusing. Basically, the souls of the dead go there and can't get back, and the living can't go there or else they'll die. Whenever I was there, I was protected by a combination of the Triforce of Courage and the magical powers of the Sages or the goddesses.

"I only ever went to one place in the Sacred Realm, the Light Temple, which is even more tightly and magically sealed than the rest of the place."

"We're here," Harry interrupted, stopping before a painting of a bowl of fruit and reaching out to tickle the pear. Link watched with his mouth hanging open as the pear giggled and turned into a green handle, which Harry pulled open to reveal the massive kitchens.

There were only a few house-elves left, cleaning a few dishes from dinner, and Harry didn't see either Dobby or Winky among them. All of them, however, were eager to please, and several scurried forwards.

"Good evening, sirs!" one squealed, making a little curtsy. "Can we get you something, sirs?"

"Yeah, two Butterbeers, and...did you want something to eat, Link?"

"Wha—? Oh...I don't really need to eat, I just thought you might be hungry." He was still looking around, bewildered, at all the attention.

"Just the two Butterbeers, then," Harry told the house-elf, who curtsied again before hurrying away.

"So, this is the kitchen?" Link asked, looking in awe at the sheer size of it all.

"Yeah," Harry agreed; answering a question he knew Link must have been thinking, he added, "and these are house-elves. They work here."

"And what's Butterbeer?"

"Oh. It's a drink."

"Anything like real beer?"

Harry shrugged. "It's really good, you'll like it."

Within a moment, a house-elf was handing them each a bottle and squeaking, "Here is your Butterbeers, sirs! Thank you for coming, sirs!"

"Thanks," said Harry, and he turned to go, Link following right behind.

As soon as they had stepped into the hall, Link exclaimed laughingly, "They're such weird little things! And friendly, too, huh?"

"Uh-huh," Harry agreed, opening and taking a sip of his drink. Link did the same, and made an impressed noise in his throat.

"Good stuff, Harry. I'm gonna want more of this."

"Maybe we can stop for some on our way back," Harry suggested. "But first...the Light Temple in the Sacred Realm?"

"Oh, right. Well, the only way to get in *there* is to either be a Sage or have a Sage bring you, and it's the same trying to leave. So the souls of the dead can't get there any more than the souls of the living."

"And that's where you went?"

"Yes."

"But then...you don't know what's after death! You don't know what the rest of the Sacred Realm is like!"

"Yes, I do, just not firsthand. The Sages are all friends of mine, and one of the demi-goddesses is my daughter. You can talk to Zelda if

you want to hear from someone who's been all around there, but she'll probably just tell you the same thing she told me."

He paused to sip his drink. They had arrived at the large, oak doors of the Entrance Hall. Pushing them open, they stepped out into the cool darkness of the grounds. Link's colour diluted slightly in the absence of light, but the sword on his back was as bright and solid as ever in its blue and gold sheath.

"What did she tell you?" Harry pressed.

Looking thoughtful, Link took a moment before he answered.

"She told me it's like Hyrule, only...better. More real, was the way she described it. And it changes according to the needs of the people, so she thinks it just appeared as Hyrule to her because that's the world she knows and loves, but to different people, it would look like their homes.

"Also, because everyone's just souls, they don't have the biological needs of their bodies, food and sleep and breathing and stuff. The Sacred Realm just meets their emotional needs, I guess, by being whatever they want it to be. People have all sorts of magical powers, even if they didn't while they were alive, the type of stuff that's probably no big deal to you. They can fly or turn into animals or speak telepathically or conjure things out of thin air... Souls are magically powerful, and in the Sacred Realm, they can use their powers without the restrictions of the Mortal Realm. But nothing's actually solid, of course, it's made of the same stuff I am. That soul substance that looks and acts almost exactly the same as solid matter would do in the same circumstances, but isn't."

Harry tried to visualize this world, but it was a difficult concept, so dramatically different from anything his imagination could conceive of. Still...

"That sounds really great," he said, feeling a small weight lift off of his chest. Somewhere, his parents and Sirius were safe and happy.

"It does," Link agreed. "That's why I'm not scared. And your godfather...I'm sure he's doing fine there."

"I just wish I could talk to him," Harry said quietly, looking out over the smooth surface of the lake as they walked past. It was still the full moon. "To all of them. I never got to say goodbye."

They walked in silence for a moment, then Link asked, "What would you say?"

Harry took a deep breath to give himself a moment to think before he answered. "To Sirius... That I miss him. That I'm still fighting. That I...I'm sorry for every stupid thing I ever did, like not practicing Occlumency...but I can do it pretty well now. And that I wish he'd been in my life for the first thirteen years. And I wish he was in it now. And...he was the best godfather I could have asked for. Having him really was like having my father back."

There was another silence, during which Harry fought against the tears threatening him. Then he went on.

"I'd tell him I hope he's happy, and free, and...I hope he gets to be with my dad and mum all his friends again for the rest of time. And because I didn't get to say it before, I'd say...goodbye."

Link nodded slowly. "What about your parents?"

That was an easier question, because Harry had considered it before. When he heard Link speak, his mother and father's images appeared before him, smiling out from the elaborate frame of the Mirror of Erised.

"That I love them, I miss them, and I wish I'd known them. They're what I'm fighting for. I won't ever forget them, and I won't let the rest of the world forget them, either. I'd tell them I hope they're happy, too, and thank them for loving me and protecting me. And I'd say goodbye to them, too. Goodbye for now," he corrected himself in a low voice. "Until I die."

There was another pause, before Link nodded again and said, "Well... When I die, I'll let them know."

Harry, who had been staring past whatever was in front of his eyes, at the faces of the loved ones he had lost, jerked his head round so

suddenly that he saw Link start next to him. "What?" he demanded, his voice oddly strained.

Link didn't look back at Harry as he explained, "I can honestly say that I know exactly how you feel. Like you said, I know what it's like to not have anyone. To be the kid everyone makes fun of and beats up..."

Harry couldn't help letting out a laughing snort.

"Yeah, yeah," Link muttered, rolling his eyes, but allowing his mouth to twitch into a smile as well. "I know. But I was a little shrimp. Remember, Mido was the size of a ten-year-old when I was five and six and seven...he was horrible to me for a long time before I was big enough to fight back. But you know what that's like. Even when you finally can, you kind of don't want to, because you're not used to being the strong one."

"You're so used to being the weak one that you've started to believe it when people tell you that you are," Harry added, "and you don't think you would be able to handle being strong."

"Until someone comes and tells you what you've always been wanting to hear, that you aren't a freak and an outcast, but you can actually do something," Link said with a fond smile. "So you find a whole new world, with friends, and people who care about you..."

"Except it's not as good as it looks," Harry interrupted darkly. "There's always someone trying to hurt everyone else..."

Link didn't answer a first. He sipped his Butterbeer again, before saying in a matter-of-fact voice, "But that's what we're for right? It's up to us to protect the world and everything in it."

Harry gave a small grunt. Maybe Link thought that their shared destiny was a noble and worthwhile calling—but he personally would rather have just had his family back.

"Heroism's not all it's cracked up to be, huh?" Link observed.

Frowning up at him, Harry began, "I thought..."

"That I like it? Nah. Oh, sure, you think about how great it would be to save the world when you're little. Then everyone's bound to like you, right?" He gave a short laugh, shaking his head. "No, sometimes it just plain sucks to have the weight of the world on your shoulders. And the battle never ends."

"It'll end soon for you," Harry pointed out.

"Yes, it will. But it began before I was born, and it will continue long after I die. Good never truly conquers evil...we just cause them intense irritation by delaying and foiling their plans indefinitely." He smirked.

"What if we don't win in the end?" Harry wondered aloud.

"We won't," Link answered promptly.

Harry choked on his Butterbeer. "What?"

"I said we won't. And neither will they. No one can win, because no one has the right answer. When I say that good never conquers evil, that's because there is no good and evil."

"Lord Voldemort said that once," Harry said, almost against his will. He could hear his nemesis' voice in his mind. "It's not true, it can't be."

"Let me finish," Link admonished him patiently. "There is no true good, there is no true evil. There's only Power, Courage, Wisdom—and what you do with them."

He said nothing for a moment, but sipped his drink, letting this statement float down into Harry's mind.

When he spoke up again, he said, "Like I said, it won't end. There's pauses in the active, visible war, but that's it. So people win the battles, but no one will win the war. It's not about the victory, though. It's about the fight."

Link's words rang through Harry's mind. *It's about the fight...* and James, Lily, and Sirius had all died fighting. And so would Link and Zelda.

And maybe he would, too...

Suddenly he came to a halt, realizing that he had traced the route he had taken with Dumbledore earlier that very night. They had returned to the graveyard. He drew in a sharp breath, and immediately hated how much it had sounded like a gasp of fear.

"You don't need to be afraid of this place," Link said quietly, apparently sensing Harry's desire to run as far and fast away from the graves as he could. "Maybe it's a little eerie, but it's not evil. You know, the Sheikah had a place of worship in a graveyard... 'course, it got all twisted and corrupted, and I ended up having to ransack the place completely to get rid of the monsters there," he added. "Creepy as hell. Literally." Frowning slightly, he muttered to himself, "'Shadow Temple... Here lies Hyrule's bloody history of greed and hatred.'"

Harry was half listening as he looked over the names on the tombstones. Pale grey angels who looked down to the earth or up to the sky, and elegantly carved animals whose curves looked unnatural in the medium of stone, guarded their charges; most of these were either lions, eagles, badgers, or snakes—the four animals of Hogwarts. At the far end of the graveyard, in fact, were four noble mausoleums, each decorated with many examples of one of these animals, and Harry was willing to bet that these were the final resting places of the four founders of Hogwarts.

"Do you know anyone here?" came Link's voice, interrupting Harry's thoughts. He jerked slightly, and noticed that the Hero had left his side, wandering between the graves and looking unnervingly like a ghost. As the light moved over him, his body faded in and out of view, only the sword on his back and the bottle in his hand remaining convincingly solid.

"I don't know," Harry managed, with unusual difficulty, to answer him. His mouth was very dry. "No."

Link came to a halt before a wide tombstone with a small statuette atop it whose shapes Harry couldn't distinguish; he was looking at them through Link's form, and so they were unclear. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Something in his tone made the small hairs on the back of Harry's neck stand on end, and he found himself walking towards Link almost against his will. He made out the shapes of the statuettes before the words—a stag and a doe, curled beneath a willow—and was aware, when he saw the two names, that they shouldn't have come as much of a surprise. Yet they did, and every part of his body, the very blood and air that that flowed through him, suspended itself as he read:

IN MEMORIAM

James and Lily Potter

Husband and wife

Father and mother

Beloved friends

Harry wondered, the thought feeling oddly practical as it quivered through the pure emotions that flooded through him at the sight of these words, who had written the inscription. He wondered who had stood here the day this small monument had been erected. Then he remembered that Sirius had been in prison. And Wormtail had been in hiding.

In Harry's mind's eye, Remus stood here. Alone. Perhaps with Dumbledore at his side. But still... Alone.

Something rose within him, and it had escaped before he realized that it was a dry, painful sob.

"I think we've gotten off topic," Link said, firmly yet gently. Glancing into his bottle to see that it was empty, he added, "Come on, let's go get seconds."

Harry took a deep breath, one that heaved his entire body, and let it out shakily, nodding as he did so. Link fixed a strong arm around his shoulders, and led him away.

After a moment, the Hylian spoke again, in the closest thing to a normal voice that was appropriate at the moment; Harry managed to force his mind to focus only on the present, Link's voice and words and meaning. "All right... So we're the heroes that have to save the world, at the expense of our own normal lives. And I was saying that since I'm going to the Sacred Realm once we get this fight all settled, I can pass along your messages to your family. Deal?"

"Ye— But how will you find them?" Harry pointed out. "Everyone who's ever died will be there, won't they?"

"That's true," Link admitted, "but the only ones present in *my* version of the Sacred Realm will be the ones I want. I mean, it'd be a pretty crappy place to spend eternity if you couldn't find anyone you know, or if you ran into someone you hate and they wouldn't leave you alone..."

Harry wasn't listening; he felt slightly dizzy. A chance to tell them anything... It was more than he could have hoped for... But it wasn't enough. Like the Mirror of Erised, it would never be enough. But at least it was *real*.

"Link..." he managed, the words lodged in his throat, "this is..."

He shrugged. "No problem."

They returned to the castle in silence, detouring back to the kitchens for two more Butterbeers before making their way back up to Gryffindor Tower. Harry was now thinking of everything he wanted to say. He would not get a response, he knew, or even confirmation that Link had passed on his words, but he was sure this would work. The mere fact that it was such an imperfect shadow of what he really wanted was proof enough for him.

"Antipodean Opaleye," Link said.

It occurred to Harry to ask another question, when they reached the Fat Lady's portrait.

"Link... What will you tell...the people you love...when you see them again?"

Half-smiling as he stepped through the door, Link replied, "Well. I haven't seen my mother since I was maybe one year old, nine thousand years ago, so first I'll find her, and tell her absolutely everything I can think of. I've got eternity, I'm sure I can cover it in that time. And then I'll ask her to tell me everything. Then I'll do the same with everyone else. I want to know everything they've done since I last saw them, and I want to meet my grandkid's kids, and their kids, and everyone else, right down to your parents. And I'll tell them all about this, of course. All about you and this world." Laughing, he concluded, "There's gonna be a hell of a lot to say, now that I think about it..."

They had arrived at Link's dorm, and he stopped to lean on the doorframe thoughtfully. "It'll be different with Malon, though," he decided seriously. "I won't have much to say to her."

This news startled Harry. "Why not?"

"She'll know already, everything I could tell her. I'm sure she won't have much to tell me, either, because I can guess what she's been doing. Singing, riding, everything she loves. So we won't talk much."

"What will you do, then?" Harry asked slowly, though he could have guessed the answer.

In a very practical voice, Link informed him, "I'll have to visit her last, because as soon as we see each other, I'm gonna hold her and kiss her, and not let her go until long after the end of time."

There was a pause, during which Link stared off into space, and Harry reflected on the intense love that was obvious every time Link talked about Malon. He wondered if his own parents had loved each other that much.

To break the serious silence, Harry commented, "You could give lessons on all the romantic stuff that girls like. I mean, where did you pick it up?"

Laughing, Link replied, "When you grow up surrounded by females, you figure out what women want. Here, I'll sum it up for you." He counted off on his fingers. "*Don't* repeat anything that results in getting slapped. *Do* repeat anything that results in getting kissed. Not to mention the fact that having 'world saviour' on your résumé is something of a plus, especially if you do something for her personally, like help her regain control of the ranch that rightfully belongs to her in the first place."

Harry nodded thoughtfully.

"And, if all else fails," Link added with a smile, "ask another girl for help."

"Like Hermione."

"Sure. But I suggest the fairy who lives in your hat."

Chapter Nine—Hylians at Hogwarts

Hermione's puffy eyes at breakfast the next morning indicated that it was not only the boys who had been up until all hours the night before, although Harry doubted that she and Zelda had been discussing the finer points of combat and adventuring. Despite it all, she wouldn't let exhaustion slow her down for a second, and as she sternly reminded Ron and Harry, they still had some reading to do before their first classes in two days.

Breakfast that day was the first meal that Zelda and Link had eaten at Hogwarts, and they were sufficiently impressed at the quantity and quality of the food, though it wasn't much by Hogwarts usual standards, since there were hardly any students to enjoy it. They were more amazed by far when a screech owl swooped down to land before Hermione and deliver the *Daily Prophet*; it took Harry and Ron a moment to realize why they were staring, until it occurred to them that owl post wasn't a common form of communication outside the wizarding world.

"Oh... We use owls to deliver letters and things," Hermione explained briefly. "And the newspaper."

"*Everyone* does?" Zelda asked.

The three Gryffindors bobbed their heads in agreement.

"Where do you get the owls?"

"People keep them as pets," Harry said. "I have one, Hedwig, and Ron has own named Pig. Pigwidgeon, I mean. Pig for short."

Zelda nodded slowly, and Harry could see her thinking the same thing he had done the first time he'd heard Pig's name.

"Owls... Wild," decided Link, shaking his head slightly as he turned back to the meal he didn't really need to eat.

Now, sitting in front of an essay he didn't really want to write, Harry would have liked to use the excuse that he had things to do with Link and Zelda in order to get out of work, but unfortunately they had

already been summoned by Dumbledore for a meeting with the rest of the staff for introductions followed by exploration of the castle itself.

So the common room was silent, empty except for Harry, Ron and Hermione, just as if there hadn't been any new and exciting additions to their world. But Harry still wasn't doing homework.

He frowned at his eagle feather quill, examining the many different shades of grey along its length. He always noticed little details like that when he was thinking hard, especially when he was at a loss for words. Writing letters to Sirius had taught him a lot about his own quills; writing letters to Remus was teaching him even more. He looked down to remind himself what he had so far.

Dear Remus,

How are things going for you? I hope the full moon wasn't too bad.

I got your Christmas present, and Sirius', and I wanted to thank you for both of them. How was your Christmas? It must be nice at Grimmauld Place with all the Order people. Do they come by for Christmas dinner?

Life here is

And he was stuck. Where was he supposed to start? Well, the obvious place would be with what he had done during the full moon, but where would he go from there? I met an ancestor of mine from a civilization over nine thousand years old, who by the way happens to remind me more and more of Sirius every time I look him, so basically I'm spending my every waking moment trying not to scream. Other than that, same old routine.

He gave a sigh. The beginning was as good a place as any to start.

interesting. We have a couple of visitors up at the school, who are going to help out the Order. I really like them, but they're pretty different from anyone else on our side.

How much do you know about a place called Hyrule?

When the new term started and everyone came back to Hogwarts, they learned that there was to be a feast on the first evening, "to welcome two guests to the school." Before everyone else met them, though, the Gryffindors had to come face to face with the Hylians who were staying with them. In order to keep the arrival of the strangers from being too big of a shock, Harry, Ron and Hermione had instructed them to stay hidden in their dorms until the students arrived and received a preparatory speech.

Just as at the beginning of every new term, the Gryffindors stampeded into their common room in a flurry of commotion and excitement, greeting friends that they hadn't managed to find or finish catching up with on the train. Of course, the first place many of them wanted to go was up to the dorms to drop off their stuff, but that was the one place they *couldn't* go yet. It took Harry, Ron and Hermione all shouting at the top of their voices to quiet them. Hermione in particular was capable of commanding great volume when she tried, and the very surprise of being ordered into silence by a girl who, while she was a Prefect, was generally not known for her temper, made many people fall into order.

"Okay," said Harry, once they had managed to get the whole of Gryffindor house gathered around him attentively. He felt like he was leading the DA again, except that this group was much larger, and what he was about to tell them was much harder to put in plain words than any defensive magic. "You know how we're having that feast, to welcome the guests or whatever?"

There was a murmur of general agreement.

"Well...the guests are here. In Gryffindor Tower. They came over the Christmas break, and they're staying with us."

"Who are they?" spoke up Neville in a slightly nervous voice.

Harry gave a sideways, thoughtful frown. "It's kinda hard to explain... Does anyone remember that big book I was reading before?" he suggested.

Blank looks came back to him, until Seamus spoke up uncertainly, "It was a history book or something, wasn't it? *The History of...something.*"

"Hyrule," Harry agreed with a nod. "It's an ancient civilization from nine thousand years ago. It's Atlantis."

Now the blank looks were dumbfounded more than anything else. Harry opened his mouth to explain further, but before he could—

"Hey, Harry, it's all quiet down there. Can we come out now?"

The Gryffindors all exchanged amazed and confused expressions at the sound of Link's voice, though he was still nowhere to be seen. Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione. The former shrugged, and the latter rolled her eyes.

"They might as well," Ron muttered. "It'll be easier to show them than to try to explain."

"Yeah, you're right," Harry agreed. Directing his voice up the two sets of stairs that led to the dorms, he called, "Okay, come on."

Every Gryffindor head swivelled to see who was coming down the stairs into the common room, and just about every jaw dropped when those two people came into sight.

"They're from Hyrule," Harry explained. "Everybody, meet Sir Link Hero I..."

"Hey. Nice to meet you."

"...And Queen Zelda Hyrule I."

"Hi. It's a pleasure."

Never had Harry borne witness to such a crowded room that was so silent. Both of the Hylians were attracting many stares, particularly from the opposite sex, but no one seemed to be able to find their voice.

"So...who wants to be the first to ask who we are, how we came from nine thousand years ago, and why we're weird-looking?"

Which confirmed Harry's suspicion that there were absolutely no circumstances under which Link could not break the ice. Nor any under which Zelda couldn't find the more tactful way to do so. She rolled her eyes with a small sigh at Link's mannerisms, though she seemed completely unsurprised by them even as she did, and smiled at the Gryffindors.

"I know you're all probably very confused, and maybe a little bit scared, and I can't blame you," she told them reassuringly. "I know I would be. But don't worry. Professor Dumbledore will explain everything tonight at the feast. We just thought you all might like to meet us first, since you'll probably be seeing us more than any of the Ravensclaws, Hufflepuffs, or Slytherins will. We'll try to stay out of your way while you get yourselves settled back into your rooms, and if you have any questions after dinner, we'll be around to answer them. All right?"

She and Link both gazed pleasantly around at the crowd, who had stopped looking so comically staggered. They now looked only mildly stunned, and quiet murmurs began to break out among them. Slowly but surely, the usual amount of talk, though far from its usual volume, resumed. Link and Zelda unobtrusively migrated to Harry, Ron and Hermione's sides as the others continued the process of resettling themselves at school.

"Oh, you should meet my sister," Ron said, craning to look out at the crowd and spot Weasley hair. "There she is... Ginny! Hey, Ginny!"

Hearing her brother's call, the fifth-year made her way through the bustling common room towards him. "Yes?"

"I want to introduce you," Ron explained. To the Hylians, he said, "This is my little sister, Ginny."

She smiled at them. "Hi," she said. "I thought I recognized you. Your pictures are in the book Harry was reading, weren't they? And I heard a few things about you, too."

"Yes, Ron's mentioned you to us as well," Zelda told her as the three of them exchanged handshakes.

"Oh, really?" she asked, glancing at her brother with raised eyebrows. "All good stuff, I hope."

"Well, we've only—"

"Hey, Ginny!"

Dean was calling from the stairway leading up to the boys' dorms. Ginny turned back and hollered, in a much more short tone than Harry personally thought was called for, "Just a second!" Returning to her first conversation, she explained wearily, "We broke up over Christmas. We were never seeing each other, there was really no point, so I ended it. Still a few things to sort out, though, 'cause he didn't take it very well." She sighed. "He didn't think there was anything wrong with the fact that we barely spoke anymore. Why is it men can't figure out what women want?" she muttered grudgingly.

Harry gave Link a small sideways glance, and saw him return it with a suppressed smirk.

"Ginny!" Dean called again.

"Fine, I'm coming!"

She stormed away to see what he wanted. Seconds later, there was a shout—"Oh, no!"—and loud crash from the stairway leading to the girls' dorms. Hermione jumped.

"Every year this happens," she muttered. "Some sort of disaster comes crashing down when we come back from summer or Christmas or Easter. I wonder what's broken this time."

She dashed away up the stairs, as Ginny returned.

"Ron, do you know where Dean put my Charms textbook?"

"Why would he have your Charms textbook? And why would I know where he put it?" Ron asked, bewildered.

"I don't know, he needed to look up some background or something," Ginny sighed, rolling her eyes. "I leant it to him before the Christmas break and now he can't find it, but he says he thinks he put it on your bed or something for you to give back to me..."

"Oh, maybe," Ron said, frowning as he thought about it. "I'll go check."

"Thanks."

Both Weasleys headed away towards where Dean stood at the foot of the boys' dorm stairs. Harry watched them go.

"What is it with True Heroes and redheads?" asked Zelda mildly.

"Huh?" Harry asked, blinking in confusion as he looked up at her.

She shrugged. "First Link and Malon, now you and Ginny..."

"What?!" Harry yelped, jumping. "No way! She's my best friend's sister!"

"And my husband is Link's brother," Zelda pointed out.

Gaping wordlessly, Harry turned to Link for support, but the Hero of Time was busy trying not to laugh as well.

"He knows what I'm talking about," Zelda said with a smile, jerking her head towards him. "Maybe you don't, Harry, but Link does."

"Then fill me in," Harry demanded, looking between them in annoyance. They were both acting like adults who understood some sort of joke that eluded the comprehension of a little boy like him, which was quite frustrating when they were so close to his own age, at least in appearance. "Why on earth do you think...me and Ginny...?"

Exchanging a look with Zelda, Link said, "It's just obvious. Like Zel said, maybe you don't know it, but...there's something going on. You like her."

"Sure, I like her," Harry admitted stubbornly, "as a *friend*."

"Of course as a friend," Zelda agreed. "You've got to start out being friends with someone. Well, okay, you don't *have* to, but it really helps."

Suddenly Harry remembered his own epiphany, the one that had come to him when Ron and Hermione had redefined their relationship. Friends first, then the rest would just happen.

"Look, Harry," said Link, pulling him down onto the couch so they could both sit and reason things through; Zelda sat in a nearby chair. "First of all, it's not like it's an insult or something. We're not making fun of you. But let's just think this over. Why are you getting so defensive?"

"Because...because it's not true!" Harry insisted.

"You're friends already, right? That's what you said?"

Harry nodded.

"How close are you?"

"I don't know. Not that close, I guess. Well, I mean, I'm close to her family, but not her specifically..."

His voice trailed off even as he spoke, because his memory was quickly rewinding. At the end of the previous year, she had been one of the ones to go with him to the Department of Mysteries. Earlier on that same year, when he had accidentally fallen into Snape's Pensieve, she had been the first one to notice that something was bothering him, and the first one he had confided in. When Mr Weasley had been hospitalized, he had been there with the Weasley family, witnessing their grief; he had seen her cry then. She had replaced him on the Quidditch team, and though she was undoubtedly talented, she had also been the first to insist that he would get his spot back, and this year he had put her back on the team. The summer before fourth year, when he had traveled with the Weasleys to the Quidditch World Cup, she had begun to open up in front of him, and since then she had been a welcome member of the

group that habitually consisted of himself, Ron and Hermione. This was true not just at school, but at Grimmauld Place, like the time he had been worried about the possibility that he was being possessed by Lord Voldemort, she had been the one to assure him that this wasn't true, and she would know, because she had been possessed by—

At the memory of this, Harry felt slightly winded. More than anything else that they had been through together, there was the Chamber of Secrets. One of the biggest milestones in either of their lives, and also one of the only things that had involved just them, no one else. His first real venture into saving a life, an individual, someone trapped and enslaved by evil, and it had been her.

Like Link and Malon.

"No— But— I— She—" Harry stammered helplessly, his eyes darting between Link and Zelda. The only coherent sentence he could put together was, "She's Ron's little sister!"

"Yes," Zelda agreed patiently. "But she's also her own person."

Harry mouthed soundlessly. There was no response to this.

"We're not saying that you're destined to be together and you should run off and get married or something," Link pointed out. "We're just saying we've both seen that look before."

"And if we hadn't pointed it out, you might never have noticed it," Zelda added.

"There's nothing to notice," Harry insisted sullenly, folding his arms.

He was saved from completing the conversation by the return of everyone else, almost all at once: First Hermione, then Ron, then Ginny.

"Poor Lavender, her parents are going to be furious at her for breaking that model galaxy."

"Why would Dean think that just because he left the book on my bed, I would know I was supposed to give it to Ginny?"

"I've been back for less than an hour and already I'm behind...I hate fifth year!" she moaned, rubbing her face with her hands and dropping onto the couch next to Harry.

"Let's go down to the feast," Harry suggested, jumping to his feet immediately, as though he had been electrocuted. He determinedly avoided Link and Zelda's eyes, turning to head out the portrait hole.

Even though two hundred Gryffindors were acting like they were no big deal, the Hylions still attracted attention from everyone else. It was unavoidable; they were the only two people in the crowd of people making their way to the Great Hall who weren't dressed in black robes. Harry had gotten used to being stared at on occasion, and though it didn't happen much anymore, it made a nice chance to know that, for once, the staring wasn't because of him. In fact, while not a single student walked by without either performing a double take or overtly staring, none of them were looking at Harry.

It did annoy him, however, to pass Cho. She was holding hands with her boyfriend, Michael Corner, and goggled more openly at him than anyone else. This time last year, they had all but officially been a couple, and now here she was treating him like a freak. He refused to meet her gaze and continued to walk with a determined stride, Link and Zelda close behind him.

When they were out of earshot, Link asked quietly, "Er... Who was that?"

"Her name's Cho," Harry grumbled, knowing how bitter he sounded, "and that guy was her current *boyfriend*." He opted not to point out that Michael had previously been dating Ginny; who knew what Link and Zelda would do with that information.

"Is she an ex?"

Harry heard what sounded like Zelda punching Link in the arm for asking this question.

"I guess, sort of," Harry answered. "But now she's just annoying. Don't worry about it."

When they arrived at the feast, Link and Zelda continued to stick close to the three Gryffindors they knew, sitting next to each other and between Harry and Hermione. The also continued, with admirable skill, to completely ignore the hundreds of pairs of eyes fixed upon them with expressions ranging from confusion to horror to shock to pleasant surprise. Harry had a feeling that it was probably all Link could do to keep from taking advantage of the situation to do something outspoken and reckless, just because he could, and it would have been the type of thing he would find funny (though Zelda would have killed him for it as soon as they were out of public again).

Because everyone was eager to know the reason for this unexpected feast, it took Dumbledore no time at all to silence them all. As soon as he rose to his feet, any and all conversation died away.

"Welcome back," said the Headmaster sincerely, extending his arms out towards them with a smile. He always sounded like he truly meant it when he greeted the students after they had been away. "I hope you all enjoyed your Christmas, and are refreshed and ready to continue with your lessons." There was a twinkle in his eyes as he scanned the crowd which suggested that he knew full well just how much they were looking forward to the inevitable return to their textbooks.

"Now," he continued, "I am sure you all want to know what exactly has warranted a feast at this time of year. You were told we have visitors, but not much more than that. I am equally sure, however, that many of you have spotted the visitors in question by now. For those who haven't, I would like to present them to you."

He nodded towards Link and Zelda, who rose to their feet and approached the staff table, where the entire hall could see them.

"Allow my to introduce you to Queen Zelda Hyrule I and Sir Link Hero I," Dumbledore proclaimed proudly to the hundreds of gaping students before him. "How they have come to be here would take much more time than we have tonight to explain. Suffice it to say that

they have come from a land that most of you have never heard of by its true name—Hyrule."

He paused, waiting for the expected murmurs of confusion.

"You have most likely heard of it under the better-known but less accurate name of Atlantis."

He paused again, this time as the quiet whispers of comprehension spread.

"Queen Zelda and Sir Hero were two of the greatest warriors of their time, not to mention some of the most magically powerful beings ever created. They have come to help us all in the war we have begun to wage, not only against Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters, but against their own undying adversary, a man by the name of King Ganondorf Dragmire. Ganon."

The crowd was silent, but it was not the same silence that had fallen at the beginning of Dumbledore's speech. This was thick with fear, rather than anticipation. Harry tried to see across the Great Hall to the Slytherin table, but it was too far away.

"That being said, we should not treat them any differently than we would treat anyone else that we host here," Dumbledore went on. "I would request that you offer them the same respect you give to your fellow students and your professors. Remember what I told you at the conclusion of the Triwizard Tournament nearly two years ago: Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open. So while these two may dress and behave differently from us, they are our allies and our friends. I encourage you to welcome them warmly.

"Once again, Queen Zelda Hyrule I and Sir Link Hero I."

There was respectful applause, and it sounded to Harry like the type of applause which indicated that the students really believed the two visitors warranted their respect. Link and Zelda waved and smiled in response, before returning to the Gryffindor table.

"All right, let's start dinner," Link said enthusiastically when he took his seat again.

"I thought you didn't need to eat," Hermione spoke up, furrowing her brow slightly.

"We don't. But we can if we want to. And it's been centuries since I had a really good feast."

Answering his summons, the tables suddenly filled with all the dishes Hogwarts was known for. This was, as Link had said, the first time that they had come to a feast since they had arrived at the castle, and this impressive meal was quite an improvement over the smaller ones they'd had thus far.

"I wish we'd figured out everything magic can do back in Hyrule," Zelda commented. "This would have made life much easier."

Having officially met the visitors and received word from Dumbledore that their presence was acceptable, as well as seeing the princess and the hero beginning to act like normal people, apparently heartened the Gryffindors. They were more willing to speak up now, and even ask questions. In fact, Harry wondered if anyone was actually eating.

"So how old are you? You can't be teenagers."

"No, we're about nine thousand."

"And you're the queen of Atlantis?"

"Hyrule, yes."

"And you're a knight?"

"Among other things."

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"She meant to each other, Link."

"Oh. Then no."

"We're cousins."

"Are you a witch and wizard?"

"Yes, but we do magic a bit differently from you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, no wands, for one thing."

"And we have can play music that has magical powers, and stuff like that."

"How did you get here?"

"Harry and Alb—Professor Dumbledore brought us."

"Long story, don't ask."

"What's up with your ears?"

Link turned to Hermione with a smirk. "You wanna field that one?"

Chapter Ten—Classroom Education

Early the next morning, Harry dragged himself out of bed to go to his first class of the new year, Transfiguration. As he dressed, the reasons why he wished it were still Christmas break came to him one by one. No homework... No Malfoy and Snape... He could just spend all day with his friends...

Oh, well. Maybe today would be fun anyway.

Yeah, right.

He went down to breakfast with Ron and Hermione, Link and Zelda still being in bed. When the three of them returned to the common room to retrieve their books, however, they found the Hylians wide awake and waiting for them. Even more bewildering, they were both dressed in Gryffindor robes and uniforms; Zelda still wore her crown and Triforce necklace, and Link still had his sword on his back, the baldric crossing over his shirt and the hilt protruding from his robe, but they had unmistakably raided someone's closets. At the moment, they were fighting over Link's hat.

"Do you know how stupid you will look wearing it with the rest of your outfit?" Zelda insisted angrily, holding it out of his reach.

"Do you know how stupid I already look dressed like this?" Link countered; he looked strange with his hair exposed. "Give it *back*!"

"No! I didn't let you wear it to our wedding, and you're not wearing it now!"

They continued to glare at each other, without speaking, but Harry had the distinct impression that their conversation was continuing within their minds; after all, they did have telepathy. A moment later, Zelda snapped her fingers and the hat disappeared. Link folded his arms and sighed angrily, looking like a child whose mother had just taken away his favourite toy to punish him for causing trouble.

"Er...something wrong?" asked Hermione, to announce their presence.

"Oh, there you are!" said Zelda, noticing them with a smile. "Hope you don't mind, but we borrowed some of your clothes. We wanted to blend in."

"No, go ahead," said Harry vaguely, trying very hard not to laugh; he could see Ron putting in just as much effort next to him. "Why do you need to blend, though? Everyone knows about you."

"Yes, but we still don't want to be too much of a distraction," Zelda explained. "We're coming to class with you."

"To class?" Ron echoed in disbelief. "But...why? You don't have to."

"Because we want to."

Link coughed noticeably.

"I want to," she amended, shooting him a look. "I want to see what sorts of things you're learning."

"Oh," said Harry, surprised. "Okay, then. We all have Transfiguration first, with Professor McGonagall."

"McGonagall... She's the Head of Gryffindor, isn't she?" asked Link, apparently trying to summon her up in his memory.

"Right."

"She seems tough."

"Yeah, she is," Ron admitted.

"At least she's human, though," Harry muttered. "Not anywhere near as bad as Snape."

"Slytherin?" asked Link and Zelda in unison. They had picked up on the patterns of life at Hogwarts already.

Harry gave a grunt of confirmation.

"He teaches Potions," Hermione elaborated, crossing the room to where her bag sat by her usual chair, to sling her books over her shoulder. "But we don't have him today. Anyway, let's get going."

As they picked up their own backpacks, Ron glanced at the Hylans before muttering to Harry in an undertone, "Why do I have a feeling today's lessons are going to be much more interesting than usual?"

Zelda's theory that she and Link would fit in better while wearing Hogwarts uniforms turned out to be surprisingly accurate; besides the obvious fact that they now matched everyone else in their style of dress, the clothes served to cover their ethereal glow and make them look more solid and existent. The small differences of their appearances were less noticeable now than the similarities. Numerous students that they passed gave them odd glances, but not a negative reaction, and quite a few people also walked by apparently without noticing a thing. Harry thought that what gave the foreigners away most was the way they walked; Zelda carried herself with the complete grace and dignity of the royalty she was, and Link's stride resembled that of a confident alpha male patrolling his territory. Neither one could completely pass for a normal teenager.

While Harry, Ron and Hermione took their usual seats in Transfiguration, Link and Zelda opted to sit at the back, where they would be unobtrusive.

"Good morning, class," Professor McGonagall said to begin the lesson. She paused after this statement, taking a moment to recognize the Hylans, before continuing as if there was nothing abnormal about her class. "Welcome back. I hope everyone had an enjoyable Christmas. And I trust you all completed your reading assignment, the conclusion of Untransfiguration and beginning of Self-Transfiguration?"

There was a murmur of assent.

"Good. So, just as a quiz, who can tell me what the great French research team of Despatie, Montimony and Boileau discovered?"

As usual, Hermione was the first to put her hand in the air.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"They were potions researchers by trade, but also performed research into the effects of different atmospheric compositions and chemical interactions on various types of magic, using Transfiguration and Untransfiguration in their experiments. They discovered that some liquids, including most of those that can be safely ingested by humans, are conducive to some types of magic, while others, including the most corrosive acids and bases, reflect it. By coating a target in such substances, it is therefore possible to form either a sort of shield against magic or else to enhance the effects of a spell on oneself, which can make Self-Transfiguration easier."

"Very good. Five points to Gryffindor. Now, Self-Transfiguration is quite possibly the most difficult form of this branch of magic. It does become easier, however, with practice. A wizard who performs the same transformation repeatedly, say, turning himself into a cat, will soon find that it takes little effort at all. That same wizard may also find that alterations which he does not use as often may be much more challenging, even if they seem simpler, such as, say, changing his eye colour.

"For beginners, however, the general rule remains that the less dramatic the change is to be, the simpler it will be to attempt. We will start with basic pigmentation changes today, focusing on the skin, hair and eyes." With a smile, she added, "I'm going to assume that at least one person in this room attempted these spells over the Christmas break, since this happens every year. In fact, in the past some people have become quite proficient without my instruction. So, if anyone in the class falls into that category, would they like to volunteer a demonstration?"

No one did, and the students fell totally silent, though all looked around to see if any of their classmates would speak up. Then, from the back, an ever so slightly translucent hand raised above the crowd. Every head swivelled to see Zelda smirking playfully.

"I'll try," she suggested modestly. Harry saw Link give her a look that very plainly had a telepathic message attached to it which no one but Zelda could hear.

Taken slightly aback, Professor McGonagall said, "Yes, of course..." she hesitated, apparently unsure how to address the young woman. Miss Hyrule? Your Majesty? "Of course," she said again, nodding. "Go right ahead."

Zelda rose to her feet, and every pair of eyes in the room followed her as she walked in her imperial way to the front of the class. Harry couldn't help wondering exactly what she was going to show them, and knew everyone else must have felt the same way, including McGonagall. He hadn't seen either Link or Zelda use their magic yet, and he had never seen magic other than Potions or Animagus transformations that didn't involve a wand. Whatever this was, he had a feeling it was going to be good, and he shifted forward in his seat.

Zelda gave her right hand a shake, as though limbering it up. She extended it straight out to the side, leaning all her weight onto her other leg, then brought up her left arm as well. Her hands met over her head, energy crackling between them. Quickly, she dropped her arms in front of her, crouching slightly as she pulled the magic along her body. For a moment, there was a bright flash of light which originated from her, and everyone had to blink and look away. The glow faded almost instantly, though, and when it was gone, Harry's jaw dropped.

Head to toe in a blue and white bodysuit with a stylized design across the chest of a red eye crying a single tear, with her hands taped for combat, most of her face hidden, and her hair wrapped in a turban, Zelda was unrecognizable as a queen or even a female. Looking closer, Harry saw that she had even changed her fair skin to a bronze tan, and her blue eyes, so like Link's, to a fiery red. It took him a moment to realize how and why she would have the ability to transform herself like this. Then it struck him: this was her alter ego...

"*Sheik*," Hermione whispered next to him.

"That's right," he said; the voice was that of a man, to match the body. "My name is Sheik, survivor of the Sheikah, ally of the legendary Hero of Time." He nodded to Link, who waved.

"Long time no see," he commented casually, unable to keep his face straight.

"Well," said Professor McGonagall, sounding impressed; the showmanship of this spell was just as remarkable as the result. "Thank you very much for that...noteworthy example."

Inclining his head respectfully, Sheik brought his hands together at his chest before swinging them in a circle to come together over his head as they had done a moment before. There was another blinding flash, and when it faded, Zelda stood there again. Her hair and skirt were momentarily caught in a breeze, but when it died, she looked as she had always done and smiled out at the class.

Someone started a round of applause, and it caught on quickly. Beaming, Zelda gave a slight bow and said, "Thank you," before returning to her seat at the back.

"All right, class," said McGonagall, taking charge of the lesson after the brief interlude. "You have the theories, and you've seen what Self-Transfiguration can do. Let's see your own efforts."

"Wow," Ron muttered, as they got to work attempting to alter their hair colours, "Hermione, you've got competition. Think you can handle being second best?"

"To the most legendary and powerful queen in the prehistory of the world?" Hermione commented dryly, raising an eyebrow. "Yes, actually, I'm okay with that."

Because Zelda's demonstration in Transfiguration class was one of the most exciting things that had happened during a lesson in a long time, the Gryffindors eagerly awaited another display during their next class, Charms.

However, neither Hylian volunteered to show their skills in this discipline as Flitwick taught them all how to control the behaviours of objects that had already been animated with spells. They were both clearly having too much fun learning about magic as it was performed at Hogwarts, Link just as much as Zelda. Both found great amusement in experimenting with Harry, Ron and Hermione's wands in turn to see what they could do; Zelda in particular found the idea of using pieces of carved wood to direct magic an interesting innovation.

"Oh! I made it fly!"

"Hey, let me try that!"

"You already had a turn."

"But all I did was make it spin around in circles! Although that was pretty funny."

"Er... Sorry to interrupt, but we really do have to be getting back to our assignment..."

"Oh, right. Here's your wand back."

Herbology, too, proved fascinating for the two of them. Link was a child of the forest, and as such, anything to do with plants appealed to him personally. The sixth-years also happened to be studying many potentially dangerous plants, which only made him and Zelda more intrigued. When a small Bombsai tree exploded at Zelda's touch, Link was practically on the floor laughing at her, which she did not appreciate.

"That was *not* funny!"

"Yes, it was! The look on your face, it was priceless!"

"Oh, honestly..."

She got revenge, however, by returning the reaction when a Venomous Tentacula took advantage of his lapse to wind a tendril around his ankle, and nearly pulled his feet out from underneath him.

"Whoa!"

"Behold, the grace and athleticism that is the Hero of Time!"

"Aw, shut up, Zel."

It was a good thing that neither one of them had a tendency to place much value on what others thought of them. Even Professor Sprout couldn't hide how entertaining she found their enthusiasm. Harry and

Hermione agreed that Ron would be sorry he had missed it for History of Magic.

As they made their way back up to the castle to wash up before their last class of the day, Link commented, "I've gotta say, going to school isn't nearly as boring as I thought it would be."

"It's definitely fun," Zelda agreed enthusiastically.

Harry had to agree. Everything was much more entertaining when Link and Zelda were part of it.

"It's about to get more 'fun,'" commented Hermione darkly, looking at something just inside the Entrance Hall of the castle, which they had just come into. Harry, Link and Zelda followed her gaze.

"Damn," Harry groaned.

Draco Malfoy, morally supported on either side as usual by Crabbe and Goyle, was making straight across the hall towards them with his usual smirk on his face. Harry stepped forward, ready for whatever his enemy intended to dish out. But he wasn't the target of Malfoy's attention.

Malfoy came to a halt before Link, and they stood face to face. It was only then that Harry realized how much they looked alike, now that they were wearing the same clothes. They both had blond hair, though Malfoy's was silvery pale and Link's was more reddish, and they both had the same sharply defined features, though Link's somehow suited him more, as though he had grown into them. In short, Link could pull off his appearance to look effortlessly handsome, while Malfoy simply looked average.

He looked Link and Zelda up and down critically before letting out a short snort of laughter, which his cronies obediently imitated.

Looking slightly surprised, rather as he would if he had seen a dog attempt a trick that was too difficult for it, Link glanced at Harry and asked curiously, pointing to Malfoy, "Who's this guy?"

Before Harry could answer, Malfoy spoke.

"So," he sneered at them, "you're here to fight the Dark Lord? And you honestly think you can?"

Link's face hardened, but he showed no outward emotion. Zelda, on the other hand, raised an eyebrow beneath her crown and observed in a dangerously icy voice, "You sound doubtful."

"That's because there's no way you can win," Malfoy replied instantly, as if explaining that night followed day, that spring followed winter, or that the world was, in fact, round. "The Dark Lord is the most powerful wizard in the history of the world. Nothing can destroy him. Especially not a couple of ghosts or zombies or something from a civilization that fell centuries ago."

"It was millennia ago, actually," Link corrected him evenly, "and we're not ghosts or zombies. We're souls."

"Just a quick question about this Dark Lord you keep mentioning," Zelda spoke up innocently. "Are you referring to Ganondorf, or Voldemort?"

Harry knew that she was fully aware of the impact of speaking Lord Voldemort's name, and he smirked when Malfoy flinched.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she went on, bringing a hand up to her mouth in a gesture of mock horror. "I forgot you don't like to hear Voldemort's name... Oops, I let it slip again!"

Malfoy fixed a snarl on his face, though Harry could see that it was artificial. "It takes more than that to scare me," he spat. "Just like it'll take more than some princess and her boyfriend to stop the Dark Lord."

Before the words were really out of his mouth, Malfoy was off the ground, having been roughly lifted by the collar by Link. The Hylian was growling murderously at the Slytherin, who let out a choking cry, kicking in the air.

"Show some respect," Link threatened. "She's the Queen of Hyrule, not a princess, and I'm the Supreme Commander of her army, not her boyfriend. Got it?"

Without waiting for an answer, Link dropped Malfoy heavily onto his feet again, where he staggered to regain his balance. Crabbe and Goyle only watched; one fidgeted uneasily, the other stood perfectly still with his mouth hanging open, and both were apparently taken by surprise at this display of sheer strength. While Link certainly looked muscular, he didn't look strong enough to lift Malfoy a clear foot off the ground with one hand and no effort, as he had just done.

"Link," Zelda scolded maternally, "he's just a little kid, he doesn't know any better. Don't hurt him too much."

Again, Harry knew that Zelda said what she did with the intent to insult, and that it would work. Sure enough, Malfoy's pale skin tinted and he glared at her.

"What did you call me?"

"A kid," Zelda repeated. With a maddeningly condescending smile, she added, "And I think it's very cute how much faith you have in your little Dark Lord. Now, we have to go do some grown-up stuff, so why don't you go outside and play? The weather's really nice."

Malfoy was very clearly at a loss for words. He could handle most threats, insults, or any number of aggressive responses to his perpetually abusive attitude, but no one had ever so completely blown him off like that, without the slightest trace of anger or fear. Similarly, no one who had threatened him had ever been so blatantly ready, willing and able to carry through on their words.

"Of course, we could always continued this conversation," Link suggested casually, flexing his fingers. "I wouldn't mind."

Malfoy continued to maintain his façade of confident aggression as he muttered mutinously for his friends to follow him outside, but he gave a small flinch when Link made a sharp move in their direction as they passed him.

"That kid'd get along great with Mido," he muttered, narrowing his eyes after the three Slytherins.

"Bullying little brats," Zelda agreed, dropping her sweet attitude to an irritated grumble. Changing the subject as they continued on their way across the Entrance Hall, she asked, "Do we have more classes to go to now?"

"We only have one class left," Hermione answered, "and we're meeting up with Ron for that one."

"Which one is that?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Hi, everybody! Welcome back!"

Tonks had her arms full of books when she entered the room just after all the Gryffindors and wove her way between the desks to the front of the class. She dropped the volumes on her desk heavily (then quickly snatched up the few papers that had fallen and righted the pencil holder she had tipped, sending its contents rolling across her desk) before smiling out at them all.

"Have a good Christmas?"

They muttered that they had.

"Glad to be back at school?"

The murmur that greeted her this time was much more subdued, and she laughed.

"Don't worry about it, I know I wouldn't be. But I promise, this term's gonna be great. Remu—I mean, Professor Lupin and I did a bunch of planning over the break, and we've got some really fun practical lessons coming up, to give you a chance to put the skills you've learned so far together in complex situations. There'll be some team games, some individual challenges, things like that. Lots of free reign to show off what you can do. Sound good?"

It did, and most of the class nodded agreeably to that effect.

"Good! Now, for your first day back, we're going to go outside and have some duelling. Leave your stuff here, you'll just need your wands."

"Duelling," said Ron thoughtfully. "Maybe it'll actually be fun this time, without Lockhart and Snape around to suck anything good out of it."

"And Malfoy," Hermione added.

But Harry was thinking about something else. Another person who could make duelling a very different experience from the one they had had in second year...

Tonks must have been thinking the same thing, because when they arrived outside, Link was at her side grinning, and she said with a wide smile, "Okay, class, slight change of plans. Today's lesson is going to be an adventure into some...different forms of defensive skills than the ones you've used before. Thanks to our very special guests." She nodded to Link, and stepped aside for him to take over.

"Hi," he said, waving at the class. "You all know me, I'm Link. You probably don't really know who I am, though. But back in my world, I'm pretty famous. Let me show you why."

He shrugged off his robe and tossed it aside. The Master Sword, which had been fairly well hidden, was now the most noticeable and striking part of his appearance, and Harry heard more than one surprised gasp.

Without a word, Link drew the shining weapon in his left hand and held it straight out to the side for them all to see. Then he quickly swung his arm in a wide circle in front of him, releasing the blade towards his right; it whipped through the air, glinting as it flipped over, to land in his casually extended right hand. Tossing it behind his own back, he turned around on the spot to catch it again in his left hand over his head. He twirled it lazily between his fingers as he lowered it to speak.

"This is what I do. Fencing. But I also know just about every other form of combat and martial arts. Archery, boxing, wrestling, and of course magic. Sometimes I blend them together. But today, I'm just

gonna show you some basic swordplay moves, offensive and defensive. Hey, Zel, spar with me."

Zelda, who was standing with Harry, Ron and Hermione, blinked in surprise. "What? Oh, Link, I'm so out of practice..."

Link snorted. "Come on, I'll go easy on you. It's just a demonstration. I don't even have my shield on me."

For a moment, she simply looked at him doubtfully. Then she sighed, "Fine," and threw off her own robe as well.

"Now, even though me and Zelda know pretty much every form of battle skills there are, she fights in a different style than me," Link explained as she stepped forward. "I use the Hylian style, and she uses the Sheikah style. You all saw her other side, shall we say, in Transfiguration class?"

Zelda rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. "I'm not going to bother transforming again," she informed Link. "I'll just use Sheik's weapons." With a flick of the wrist, she conjured from thin air into her right hand a short sword, much less decorative than Link's but evidently just as sharp.

"All right," he said, bracing himself in a fighting stance, facing her and smiling. "Let's go."

First, he showed them the proper technique of simple vertical slashes, horizontal swipes, backhanded manoeuvres, and head-on stabs. He showed them how to block these same moves or turn opponents' attacks against them. With each move, he grew more and more enthusiastic, and Zelda, too, couldn't hide the fact that she enjoyed the fight. However, it was very clear why Link was the Hero of Time: because he *loved* it. He moved swiftly and easily, and though it was obvious that he wasn't really trying to attack Zelda, it was equally obvious that he could have killed her if he had wanted to, though she was apparently no stranger herself to this type of combat herself.

Soon, they had moved from demonstrating individual moves into unscripted, real sparring. Gymnastics came into play as both Link and Zelda used flips, rolls, handsprings and other skills to dodge attacks

from each other; they also began using their hands and feet to attack and defend, showing that they did, in fact, know their ways around wrestling and boxing as well. Though it was impressive to see how much Zelda could pull off in a skirt, it was far more impressive to see the things that Link could pull off at all, especially given that he hardly appeared to be trying. This was play for him, not a challenge, and Harry suspected he was getting caught up in it much as Quidditch players did in their matches, forgetting what else was going on.

The match ended when Link performed a light roundhouse kick to bat aside a punch Zelda was trying to land on his face, and immediately followed up with a twisting stab of his own weapon that caught her blade and sent it flying from her grip to land several metres away. With a victorious laugh, he pointed the Master Sword to her throat and informed her happily, "I win."

Harry's suspicion, that he had slipped into a zone of oblivious concentration, was confirmed when he visibly jumped at the round of vigorous applause that followed this display. Grinning sheepishly around at the crowd that he had apparently forgotten was watching, he said, "Thanks."

"Er...Sir Hero..." spoke up Dean Thomas nervously after a moment.

"Just call me Link.

"Okay, then... Link... I mean...that was really, *really* cool, but... What does it have to do with magic?" he finished sheepishly, almost apologetically.

"I'm glad you asked," Link told him with a nod. "Basically, it can't hurt to know how to kill someone in a more conventional way. Why's that, you ask? Well, I find that sometimes the most effective way to battle magical opponents is through non-magical means. They won't be expecting that, will they, so they won't know what to do. And if you lost your wand or something, you wouldn't have a choice. Plus there's no counter spell for a good kick in the face," he concluded with a sideways smirk.

"Now, I should also point out that this particular sword is magical, and specifically forged to conquer the forces of evil," Link went on, holding

up the Master Sword. "It lets me travel through time, it can defeat things that aren't really alive, it identifies people that are destined to save the world, and I can use it against magic." To Zelda, he gave a jerk of his head towards himself and said, "Pass me some electricity, Ganon style."

Zelda nodded and raised one hand over her head, where it surrounded itself with throbbing yellow light. When she had built it up, she flung her arm down as if pitching a ball, and released the electricity towards Link. He didn't move as it came towards him, but at the last second, he slashed the Master Sword in front of him and repelled Zelda's magic. She ducked as it soared over her head.

"See, like that," Link said, smiling at the awed class again. "Not to mention that this sword even has some magical powers of its own. Here, lemme show you."

Zelda must have known what was coming, because she stood back as Link braced himself in a wide lunge, his sword held straight out at shoulder height and a look of fierce concentration on his face. At first, nothing seemed to be happening, but only seconds later, they saw the blade begin to crackle and glow with blue energy. A quiet gasp passed through the class, and they watched as Link continued to hold his position while the aura of power grew.

Then, with an almighty battle cry, Link released the charged energy and whirled in a circle; the Master Sword was a blur of magic that looked like fire, tearing a ring through the air that would certainly destroy anyone or anything that fell within it.

When the burst of energy subsided, Link wiped his brow with his sleeve and leaned on the end of his sword, which was jabbed point down into the sod. The Gryffindors were completely silent in amazement as he looked out at them pleasantly.

"So... Any questions?"

That evening, Link and Zelda's display in Defence Against the Dark Arts, and the explanation of Zelda's remarkably good gender-switching disguise, were the central topics of conversation at Hogwarts. The Gryffindors sixth-years told all their friends what they

had seen, and by that evening, the whole school had heard the tale. Some thought it was exaggerated, and though Harry knew from personal experience that events such as this often became so embellished and elaborate that no one could mistake them for reality any longer, he found that not to be the case this time. Fiction couldn't improve on truth.

"...and then they started doing these somersaults and *back flips*..."

"She got him in a headlock, but he got out of it..."

"...had this huge sword..."

"You wouldn't believe it."

"...so she looked just like a man, you'd never know..."

"...thought someone was gonna get their head cut off."

"It was so cool."

"...sends out a bunch of magic right from the sword..."

"Incredible."

"Amazing."

"Wow."

And as Ron pointed out, the story that spread at mach two through the halls of Hogwarts was sure to be enough to convince Draco Malfoy that "some princess and her boyfriend" were more than a match for his "little Dark Lord."

Fortunately, both Zelda and Link were completely used to being in the spotlight, and didn't notice at all when all eyes fell upon them when they entered the Great Hall for dinner. They were more pleased that they had gotten a chance to use some skills that had been dormant for far too long within them, as well as dabbling in some new areas.

"I wish I could have gone to school like this when I was a kid!" Zelda said keenly as she filled her plate, sitting across from Link and next to

Hermione. "I was home schooled by my nursemaid, Impa. Goddesses know I love her, and she taught me a lot of great things, but I never had classes or people my own age or anything like that. This way is so much fun." She grinned before adding, "Plus I got to be Sheik again. Now *that* was great."

"I can't believe you actually have a class where you get to fight," Link said; he hadn't stopped smiling all afternoon. "Man, I've missed that," he sighed contentedly, "swordplay and everything. It just felt so good to get back to it." For at least the tenth time, he concluded, "Most fun I've had in a long time."

"And I don't know why you complain about homework," Zelda went on. "That assignment of Flitwick's sounds really interesting!"

"Not for people who don't like to spend all their time reading," Link countered darkly.

"Well, forgive me if I enjoy being productive and learning something," Zelda told him haughtily.

Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged furtive smiles when the face Link was making at her as she spoke was interrupted by a piece of potato that flew across the table and struck him between the eyes.

Chapter Eleven—Practical Applications

That evening found the Gryffindors in the common room, having returned full-force to the drill of nightly homework. Only Link was left with nothing to do, as Zelda had disappeared along with Hermione and Ginny, and he was getting restless.

"Hey," he said, dropping onto the arm of Harry's chair, "do you know where the girls went?"

"Library, I think," Harry replied distractedly.

"Where's that?"

"Well...it's kind of hard to explain..."

"I have to go there now anyway, to grab a book of Hermione's," Ron spoke up, closing a Transfiguration textbook. "I'll show you."

"Great, thanks," Link said.

Harry closed his book and stood up as well, not wanting to be the only one left behind. "I'll come, too."

As they made their way through the halls, Ron asked curiously, "So are you and Zelda going to learn to use magic the way we do, for this fight against Ganondorf and You-Know-Who?"

"I don't think so," Link replied, frowning thoughtfully. "Frankly, I think we'd do better without it. We've been fighting our way for so long, it's like instinct. Why change it? Some of your things are pretty neat, though," he admitted. "I mean, the Astronomy and stuff is neat, and Care of Magical Creatures, things like that..."

"And Quidditch," Harry put in, grinning.

"And...what?" and Link, bewildered.

"Quidditch," Harry repeated. "You've... We haven't told you about Quidditch?"

Link shook his head slowly. "What is it?"

"It's this game we play, everybody knows about it," Harry explained. "Me, Ron and Ginny are all on the Gryffindor Quidditch team—"

"Harry's the captain," Ron put in.

"Yeah, I am," Harry agreed. "Anyway, there's seven players on each team, and four balls in play, and we fly on broomsticks—"

"You can *fly*?" Link interrupted eagerly. "You have to show me how to do that!"

Harry and Ron both laughed.

"You'll be a big Gryffindor fan," Ron decided, nodding. "I can just picture you leading everyone else in screaming for us."

"I will make it my personal mission to be the loudest, most obnoxious fan in the crowd," Link promised seriously. "Shouldn't be much of a challenge," he added as an afterthought. "Not for someone who, as Zelda will be the first to tell you, is usually loud and obnoxious without trying."

"Yeah, the Gryffindor side will have no trouble drowning out the Slytherins," Harry agreed, laughing slightly at the mental image of Link as an enthusiastic Quidditch fan. "Go! Go! Gryffindor!"

"Lions for the cup!" Ron added.

"Lions, huh?" Link said with a smirk.

"Yeah, like on our uniforms," Harry told him, slightly confused. "Why?"

In explanation, Link cleared his throat, took a deep breath and bared his teeth in a vicious, bestial grimace. From the back of his throat came a low, rolling growl that sounded convincingly like a big cat. After this warm up, he took another breath...

...And let out a deafening, almighty *roar* that Harry wouldn't have thought a human being capable of. But, of course, Link wasn't exactly a human being.

"Whoa," Ron said disbelievingly. "That was—"

"What is that unearthly din?" came a voice of icy fury from just behind them.

"Din?" asked Link, completely thrown by the mention of one of his goddesses. "What about Din?"

The three of them turned to see the one professor who was least likely to have any tolerance at all for Gryffindor cheers in the halls.

"Potter," Snape said coldly, looking them over, "and, of course, Weasley, and...Sir Hero, our distinguished guest."

"Wait, don't tell me," Link said, holding up a hand and screwing up his face in concentration. "You're Severus Snape, right?" he guessed.

Apparently the Potions master was incapable of not curling his lips in disgust, even in front of important visitors. "Yes," he said mildly. "And are you the one responsible for that...caterwauling?"

Link grinned. "Uh-huh. You pick up those sorts of things growing up in the forest. I mean, there were no lions in the place where I lived, but still."

"Indeed," Snape commented stiffly. "Raised by wolves and wild dogs, were we?" he added.

Harry felt a stab of annoyance at the mention of those two animals, of all the possibilities he could have come up with...

Link, of course, didn't notice anything. He simply shrugged and said, "Not quite, just some very hyperactive little children. Anyway, we were just on our way up to the library, so we'll keep going—"

"More quietly, I would hope."

"Oh," said Link, apparently understanding only now why Snape had bothered to stop them. "Yes, of course." He smiled in his usual friendly way, but of course his charm was lost on the ice cold Potions master, who had no discernable soul that Harry had yet managed to

find. Except for the one time he had slipped into the Pensieve—but he didn't want to remember that any more than Snape himself did.

"We're just going," he said shortly, turning on his heel to head to the library without waiting for anyone to speak further. Link and Ron hesitated, both apparently looking for someone to formally end the conversation, but decided simply to catch up with Harry before he got too far away.

"So...you and Snape aren't the best of friends?" Link asked mildly.

Harry grunted in answer. "He hated my dad, and now he hates me."

Link nodded, apparently knowing when to not ask.

When they reached the library, it didn't take them long to find Hermione, Ginny and Zelda at the table by the windows which many Gryffindors usually chose as a homework spot. The two students were busily scribbling away in silence, as the Hylian queen sat by a stack of volumes that looked like ones Harry and Ron would expect to see Hermione joined at the hip with, flipping through the pages and scanning the words. Her eyes, again like Hermione's, could turn into blurs when she read quickly.

"Hey," said Harry, to announce their presence.

"Hi," answered all three girls in the same vague tone, none of them looking up from their occupations. Harry and Ron were fine with this, as they both had homework to do anyway, and each took a seat at the table; the former opened his work and began to reread what he had written so far for Herbology, while the latter reached for the few books Hermione had before her. Link, clearly still bored but opting against further whining, simply read over Zelda's shoulder.

When Ron had scanned everything Hermione had before her, he asked, "What happened to that book you had for Defence Against the Dark Arts? Something about...rising forces..."

"*Rising to Fight the Forces*," Hermione corrected without looking up. "I finished with it, so I put it back." Frowning at her essay, she added, "I thought I was finished with it, anyway. But I need a reference."

"Good, 'cause I need it, too."

They both rose from their seats and headed off to wander between the shelves and recover the misplaced book.

"Hey, Harry," Link spoke up suddenly, "are there any books in here about that Quidditch game you were mentioning?"

"Sure, tons. Read *Quidditch through the Ages*, that should tell you everything."

Zelda frowned at Link, who looked back at her. Harry could tell, again, that they were communicating telepathically. It was strange to see, because he had never realized how much of a conversation was obvious outside of the spoken words. They both left as well, presumably to locate the aforementioned text.

Leaving him with Ginny.

He wished fervently for some telepathy of his own, so he could tell Link and Zelda exactly what he thought of their not-so-subtle plan. But all he could do was give a faint sigh of frustration.

"What?" asked Ginny, looking up for the first time.

"Nothing," he muttered.

Raising an eyebrow, Ginny dropped her quill and leaned her chin into her elbow with a determined look on her face. "You and I both know that it is never a good idea for you to lie about that sort of thing."

She was right. But this really was nothing.

Wasn't it?

Oh, how could he even think that! Of course it was nothing! It would only be *something* if there was any possibility at all that Link and Zelda were right and he really did think of Ginny as anything other than Ron's sister and a semi-close friend. Which he didn't. At all. Never had, never would. That would be ridiculous.

Wouldn't it?

He shook his head sharply, willing the devil's advocate in his mind to go away.

"Come on, Harry," Ginny pressed, now leaning back in her chair with her arms folded and a scowl on her face. "Don't be stupid and stubborn. That's the problem with boys, they never want to talk about how they really feel." She rolled her eyes.

So, if it was nothing, then why did it bother him that she had just now compared him to every other boy in the world? Why did he expect for some reason that she should have thought of him differently?

"Yeah...well...it's just no big deal, that's all," he told her casually. "Nothing earth-shattering, just...some stuff that me and Link and Zelda were talking about the other day."

"About how they think you and me would be a cute couple?"

Harry's heart stopped in his chest, out of shock more than for any other reason. He realized too late that his wide-eyed horror had destroyed any chance of lying about this, and Ginny must have noticed the same thing, because laughter was shining in her eyes as she waited for him to speak.

"I don't...What are you talking about?" he asked helplessly.

Ginny laughed. "Don't bother, Harry. Girls *do* talk about how they feel. And Zelda told me how she felt about you and me."

"Which was?" Harry asked darkly.

"Just what I said, that we'd be cute together." She shrugged. "I dunno, frankly I think it'd be weird."

Bewildered by this, Harry pointed out, "But didn't you used to...?"

"Have a crush on you? Sure, before I got to know you. No offence, but... Now you're my friend, it'd just be too weird."

Harry opened his mouth to say what he really thought, that being friends first was better, like Ron and Hermione, but stopped himself when he realized he would just be arguing with her over something that they both felt the same about: that they were in no way inclined towards being a couple. So he simply closed his mouth and said, "I guess."

"You guess?" Ginny repeated. "What, you mean you actually think that maybe we—?"

"No, I don't, of course I don't," Harry cut her off quickly. "I just think that...I dunno...friends who start dating, it might not be such a bad thing."

Ginny considered this. It was a moment before she spoke again.

"Maybe," she finally said slowly. "I mean, look at us. I don't mean us as a couple, I mean the relationships we had before. You and Cho. Me and Michael. And me and Dean."

"And then look at Ron and Hermione," Harry finished.

Again, Ginny didn't answer right away. "But then look and Link and Zelda."

"What do you mean? They're not a couple."

"Exactly. They're just friends, and it works for them. So sometimes being friends first just means that...you're really good friends."

Harry thought about this. Then he smirked.

"What?" Ginny asked.

"Well, another reason why Link and Zelda are just friends is that...they aren't. They're cousins."

"Oh, yeah," Ginny laughed. "That would kind of get in the way of the romance, wouldn't it?"

"I'll say."

"But I still think that even if they weren't related, they'd be better off like this, you know? With other people, not each other."

"Probably," Harry agreed. "But you never know, do you? Everything about them might be different if they weren't who they are now."

Ginny nodded thoughtfully, staring off into space. "Yeah..." she mused, possibly talking to herself. "If people came from different places, if they met each other differently and everything...you never know what might have happened."

Ginny's words were still echoing in Harry's mind when he woke up the next morning, after a sleep that had been rough because they were echoing through it all night. They rang true on so many levels, about every person he had ever met. If his parents had lived when Voldemort fell, for example, every relationship he ever had with everyone in his life would have been completely different.

Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley wouldn't have been his family; his mum and dad and Sirius and Remus would have been instead. His life would have been happy and peaceful, with Voldemort merely a distant memory.

There were more complicated details to consider, though. Like how he would have come to Hogwarts like any other little wizard boy, and he and Ron wouldn't have been so fascinated with each other. Ron himself would have even been a little bit different, because he would have neither a hand-me-down pet rat as the only living thing he could always depend on nor a morbid fear of both the name "Voldemort" and the man himself. Of course, Ron and Harry still would have met, being in the same year and the same house, but they probably wouldn't have filled the voids in each other's lives. And so they wouldn't have been united against Hermione, and never would have reconciled with her to become the indivisible trio they currently were. And he and Hermione wouldn't have become pseudo-Weasleys, welcome in the Burrow at any time, close enough to know his parents and his brothers and sisters personally.

And if Ginny hadn't been Ron's sister first...

Blinking at his reflection in the mirror as he attempted (without much hope) to brush his hair, Harry firmly fixed his mind on something else. He remembered out of the blue that he had meant to take a moment before the hectic schedule of school resumed in order to fine tune the exact words he wanted Link to deliver to his family. Sure, he had the gist of it, but he wanted to make sure he phrased it exactly right. Well, now the hectic schedule of school had returned, but he still wanted to take the time.

Today's classes would be much more uneventful than yesterday, because Zelda said that Dumbledore had given her and Link a few things to do. Maybe this was specifically to keep them out of the classroom, although Harry couldn't really see why he would want to do that; they just wanted to learn, like everyone else. So whatever he had assigned them to must have been genuinely important.

They weren't around when Harry, Ron and Hermione went down to breakfast, or to their first lessons, but whether they were still in bed or somewhere else was impossible to say. Besides, Harry did have other things to think about.

He walked through that day in a fog, half because of how little sleep he'd gotten the night before—well, since Link and Zelda's arrival, really—and partly because he was lost in thought about what he'd done in lieu of sleep on the night of the full moon, less than a week ago... Had it really only been a few days? It felt like months. When Hermione hissed at him to focus for the sixth time that day ("Harry, will you *please* pay attention? I don't want to have to give you McGonagall's lecture tonight!"), he was therefore rather short with her.

"I'm trying to figure out the first things I'll ever say to my mum and dad," he told her with a growl in his voice. "And since I won't be the one doing the actual speaking, I'd like to at least get the wording right."

Hermione stared at him as she had done two and a half years ago, when he'd told her he thought he'd seen his father casting a Patronus, as though she was worried that he wasn't entirely sane.

"Harry—"

"Don't ask, I'll explain later. If you don't listen, how will either of us get our homework done?"

They both looked over at Ron, on Hermione's left, who looked as glazed over as Harry felt, with his head propped up in his hand, his eyes unfocused, and his mouth hanging slightly open. Hermione let out a sigh that anyone who didn't know her would have taken for genuine annoyance.

"Good point," she admitted, her tone again sounding bitter to the untrained ear, but she cast her boyfriend a faint wistful smile.

After their last lesson, Harry, Ron and Hermione retreated to the library. Harry was still mildly curious as to what Link and Zelda had done with their day, but he was sure he would find out anything that mattered. Just as he was settling down, determined to focus once and for all, Hermione asked him, "So...what were you talking about in Transfiguration that you said you'd explain later?"

"Huh?" asked Harry and Ron in unison.

"Harry, you said you were trying to determine what you were going to say to your parents," Hermione reminded him patiently. "I'm a little bit curious, and I think you can understand why."

Harry noticed that Ron was now listening at attention; his quill had dropped out of his hand and his eyes were wide.

"Oh... Okay," Harry began awkwardly, "well, first, just so you know I'm not going mad, I'm not going to see or talk to my parents."

Ron and Hermione relaxed visibly.

"But I am getting a chance to give them a message. Sirius, too."

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look, tense once more.

"Harry..." Ron began slowly, "that doesn't make sense."

"Yes, it does," Harry retorted quickly. "Think about it. What do Dementors do?"

Looking startled by the apparently random question, Hermione tried to stammer an answer, but Harry got there first.

"They suck out your soul. And what are ghosts made of?"

"I don't—"

"Souls," Harry cut in. "And what are Link and Zelda?"

"Sou—"

"Souls! Yes! And what part of you dies?"

Now he let them answer. They gave each other the sort of he's-finally-lost-it glance that would normally have driven Harry up the wall, but at the moment he didn't care.

Ron answered uncertainly, "Your soul?"

"No!" Harry countered, snapping his fingers as though Ron had just revealed the meaning of life. "Your *body* dies, but your soul is immortal! So what happens to it? Some people take steps to hold a part of their soul here, and they become ghosts, but most people don't, including Mum and Dad and Sirius. Their souls are somewhere else, and Link knows where. He told me."

And Harry was spilling out everything he and Link had talked about that night. By the time he had finished, Ron and Hermione's faces had melted into identical expressions of blank shock.

"Oh, *Harry!*" gasped Hermione. "That's *wonderful!*"

"Blimey," muttered Ron in a weak voice. "He really is like Sirius, now you mention it, isn't he?"

"He's so sweet!" Hermione said, looking on the verge of tears. "This settles it, Link is absolutely the most considerate man in the history of the world."

Ron opened his mouth to say something, giving her a slightly bitter look out of the corner of his eye; however, he didn't get a chance.

"I don't know what I did to deserve such lavish praise, but I'm afraid I have to correct it...I believe I predate the history of your world, kid."

Hermione positively jumped in her seat as Link clapped his hand on her shoulder. Harry smirked as she turned scarlet, and Ron looked placated as well by her embarrassment. Link dropped into a nearby vacant chair, tossing a book onto the table in front of him. Apparently whatever assignment he and Zelda had to do required some research.

"Harry was just telling us what you're gonna do for him, about his parents," Ron explained. "Hermione seems to think you should be knighted for it."

Link let out a short laugh. "Well, sorry, but you're too late. Sir Link Hero I, remember? I've already got every military title there is, Fairy Girl, give or take a million."

He blinked.

"Did I just say what I think I just said?"

"Er...yeah," Harry confirmed, glancing at Ron to see his reaction to the unexpected pet name; he looked more confused than anything else.

"Weird," Link muttered, shaking his head slightly. That's what I used to call my oldest daughter, Saria. I guess it just slipped out." He sighed heavily. "You remind me of her. Same spirit. One in a million people really have that sort of...brightness."

For a moment he simply looked at Hermione thoughtfully, seeing past her bemused expression to the spirit he said she possessed. Then, abruptly, he stood up and walked away with his book.

"What was that?" Ron muttered, watching as Link strolled past the shelves of books on Divination, absently sliding the one he carried back into its place.

Hermione gave a small, sad sigh. "He misses his family, of course. He spent so much of his life without anyone who loved him, and he's always been in the spotlight as a hero, and now—"

She stopped hastily, and Harry felt her eyes upon him though he was looking intently at the Charms essay before him.

"Anyway, Ron, you were asking me something about the establishment of democracy in South Africa?"

Harry could practically see the pointed expression on her face that said "drop it," and wondered why it bothered him.

"Oh...yeah..." came Ron's answer. "So...what's democracy in South Africa?"

That night in the common room, it was Link and Zelda who were working hardest. They had found a quiet corner and were sitting on the floor with their heads together, flipping through papers and books. For the two hours that Harry had been watching, they hadn't said a word to each other, but yet they were obviously working together on something. Occasionally he also thought he saw a short flash like an electrical shock pass between them, and this generally elicited a small jerk from whoever was on the receiving end, but he couldn't figure out what they were doing...

Then he felt stupid.

"They're speaking telepathically," he said finally; this was something he had of course seen them do, but not for any sustained length of time, so it had never occurred to him that they could hold an entire evening's intense conversation that way. Still, the revelation seemed obvious as soon as he said it.

He was speaking to himself more than Ron and Hermione, who were too busy snuggling over a game of chess which wasn't occupying much of their concentration.

"Check," said Ron when he placed his queen before Hermione's king, which according to their rules meant that he got a kiss. Hermione laughed slightly as she gave it, sliding her knight along its next move.

When their lips parted, she told him with a grin, "Checkmate."

Ron looked down at the board and saw that she was right.

"Hey!"

"It's good for you to lose once in a while," she told him airily, leaning back in her seat.

"Wanna play another game?"

"You just want to capture more pieces and get more kisses."

"What's your point?"

Hermione leaned in towards him and closed her eyes, but just as her lips brushed Ron's, she pulled away and stood up to leave the game. He let out a frustrated groan.

"You just like to torture me," he complained, flopping limp in his chair and dropping his head back.

"Oh, come on, we can't just spend all night snogging over a chess board," Hermione scolded.

"You're right. We should get rid of the chessboard."

Hermione laughed, but didn't give in. "I just think you should go do some work." She deposited herself in the chair next to Harry's and added quietly, as Crookshanks hopped up to her lap, "But I do like to torture him."

Harry disguised his laughter as a coughing fit, an old trick Ron frequented in Divination classes with Trelawney.

"Harry," came Zelda's voice suddenly. She didn't sound like she was calling for him, simply stating his name, but why else would she speak aloud?

"Yeah?" he answered.

"Here."

"Sounds like you're needed at a Council of the Elders meeting," Ron observed.

Harry crossed the room and looked down at Link and Zelda, who were both staring at a photo that jolted his stomach. There, dressed in black graduation robes with green trim and a silver-tasselled mortarboard, smiling his charming smile across his handsome face, was Tom Riddle, age eighteen.

"Do you know this guy?" Link asked, not sounding at all as if he realized that he was looking into the eyes of the last man in whose veins ran the blood of his own eternal arch-nemesis. Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Don't you?" he asked, trying to remain calm.

"His name is Tom Marvolo Riddle, class of 1944, disappeared the following year," Zelda recited.

"Looks a bit like you, doesn't he?" Link added as a casual observation, cocking his head.

"No, he doesn't," Harry said vehemently, snatching up the photo and resisting—barely—the urge to rip it up and throw it in the fire.

Zelda and Link looked at each other in the way that Ron and Hermione so often did, as if they suspected something was wrong with Harry, and in the back of his mind, Harry wondered if this was a telepathy thing that only he wasn't in on.

"Harry, who is he?" Zelda asked softly.

At first, Harry fidgeted uneasily, running his fingers through his hair and casting around the room for something. Perhaps for the words to explain what was running through his mind in a fury of mixed emotions, mostly centred around anger. Then he folded his arms and forced out, in a voice that sounded far more strained than he would have liked it to, "Why don't you know?"

He would have liked them to answer on Dumbledore's behalf, because he knew the Headmaster wouldn't have left out such a detail as the first eighteen years of Voldemort's life by accident. Why was he forcing Harry to relive the unloved childhood of his nemesis, to twist the knife of their mutual hatred in his own chest?

"I'm sorry," Zelda said softly, "but Dumbledore just told us to ask you if we had any questions about these things..." She waved towards the documents strewn between herself and Link.

Angrily, his temper directed more than anything else at the fact that there was no one he could fairly blame, Harry made a noise of fury, dropped down next to them and snarled, "Fine. I'll tell you."

As he told the story, from when Tom Riddle, Sr., abandoned his pregnant wife to the day Tom Riddle, Jr., dropped off the face of the planet to sink into the Dark Arts and emerge as Lord Voldemort, he marvelled grudgingly that Dumbledore had managed not to relate any of this. Even more, he marvelled that he himself hadn't noticed the massive omission.

When he had talked himself into silence, Link was the first to speak.

"Dumbledore said you fought the young Voldemort in the Chamber of Secrets with the Master Sword. That was Tom Riddle, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Harry said, his voice harsh, "and he was just as bad then. Why do you need to know this all of a sudden?" He knew the question was rather out of place, but he needed an answer.

"Dumbledore gave us some things to learn about," Link told him. "And like Zel said, he told us to ask you if we had any questions."

"What is there besides...Tom Riddle?"

Zelda ruffled through a stack of papers and pulled out a list in what looked like Dumbledore's loopy handwriting. "Well, there's Polyjuice Potion."

"Figures."

"And Aurors."

"Good to know."

"Some more names...Bartemius Crouch, Sr. and Jr."

"Scum."

"And Rabastan, Radolphus and Bellatrix Lestrange."

"Don't ask me about her," Harry said shortly. "Just...don't do it. Don't ask."

"Er...okay," Zelda agreed gently. "There's also some spells. Imperius—"

"Cruciatus, and Avada Kedavra?"

"You know them?"

Harry flipped up his fringe. "I'm rather intimate with them," he explained darkly. "Particularly the last one. Anyway, what else?"

"Memory Charms."

"Ask Lockhart about that," Ron spoke up, and Hermione couldn't conceal a small smile; apparently they had both been listening.

"Impediment Jinx, Stunning, Disarming."

"Basic and useful."

"And he wants up to have some basic history of the Dark Arts and your government. The Ministry of Magic, is that right?"

"Yeah... Geez, doesn't ask much, does he? Why do you need to know all this? What kind of plan does he have?"

"We wondered that ourselves," Link admitted.

"But we think he's just covering all his bases to make sure we know everything we could possibly need to," Zelda explained.

"And killing time," Link added, in his usual direct way.

"Until what?" asked Harry apprehensively.

With a weary sigh, Zelda replied, "Until Ganon and Voldemort start something."

Harry gaped. Then he said bluntly, "I'm going to talk to him. That plan is mad."

"He won't change his mind for you, Harry," called Ron.

"That's not all I want to talk to him about."

Five minutes later, Harry was pounding on the Headmaster's office door.

"Come in," came Dumbledore's voice.

Harry started on his rant even as he opened the door.

"You planned it so I would have to tell them all about Riddle when you could have just explained it to them yourself, and I'm gonna tell you what I told them, there's no way I'm talking about Bellatrix other than to wish her the most horrible death possible, and I don't know why you're sending them on this information wild goose chase anyway when we should be getting ready to fight instead of reading up on history! Link's got his damn sword, let him hack Ganon to bits if he has to and then pass it on to me, and I'll..."

He stopped. He hadn't planned on getting this far without an interruption and he didn't know where he was going with that train of thought.

"You'll do what, Harry?" Dumbledore asked calmly, curiously. He was sitting in his maddeningly serene way behind his desk, his fingers laced, almost as though he had been expecting this invasion.

"I'll...I'll kill Voldemort!" he blurted, for lack of a better idea. "Everything will be over, once and for all! Come on, we can do it tonight, right now!" He knew as he spoke that this plan would be, for one reason or another, impossible. And sure enough...

"That can't happen, Harry."

"Why not?"

"Many reasons. Shall I address them in the order you brought them up?"

Harry dropped defiantly into the chair opposite Dumbledore's desk that was beginning to feel like his. "I've got time."

"Very well. First, then, the matter of Tom Riddle. Why I made you tell his story."

"You admit it?" Harry said viciously.

"I do. You needed to tell that story, for yourself, to make him into a human."

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Voldemort has always been, to you as to most people, nothing more than a monster. Iconic. This image was subconsciously burned onto your brain when you were an infant. Voldemort equals evil—"

"But that's true!"

"Nothing is ever that simple. Does anyone represent the incarnation of good?"

Knowing where this was going, and determined to fight it all the way, Harry defiantly answered, "Yes. Sirius did."

Dumbledore gave a sad smile. "You know what his youth was like."

Harry couldn't deny this. The image of his father and godfather torturing Snape continued to lurk in the back of his mind. "Okay...Zelda, then. And Link."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Like anyone else, they have their flaws. They were both well-known, for example, for their stubborn tempers and refusal to compromise. When they fought each other, there was no peace in Hyrule Castle."

Opting not to acknowledge the fact that this was in no way a stretch of the imagination to picture, Harry said bitterly, "Fine. So no one represents true good. Happy?" Link had told him this before, of course, but he hadn't been willing to accept it then. He still didn't know that he could.

"If that is the case, then how can anyone embody evil?" Dumbledore continued.

"He's incapable of love," Harry retorted in aggressive triumph. "You told me so yourself."

"I told you that he does not love and does not understand love."

"Same thing."

"Harry, when you were eight years old, were you capable of using magic?"

"Yes," he replied mutinously, again knowing what Dumbledore was aiming at.

"But did you? And did you understand it?"

There is no true good, there is no true evil...

Harry didn't answer. Dumbledore moved on.

"Voldemort is physically not the man he once was. He is corrupted. He is mutilated. He borders on deranged."

"He *is* deranged."

"His plots are too intelligent to be so easily dismissed, as well you know," Dumbledore countered gently. "Regardless, the point I am trying to prove is that he is, in his purest essence, diluted to its most elemental, a human. And you don't know it, or don't want to admit it. But you must know it, for it is your destiny to fight him—to kill him or die at his hands—and you must know what you are fighting. Not a monster, but a sentient being, composed of the same elements as anyone else."

"But...if I think of him as a human...won't that make it harder to kill him?"

"Possibly. Probably. In fact, I would hope so."

"Then—why—why make it hard?"

"You must make the choice, when the time comes, with your eyes and your mind open, knowing what your options are. You must know that you are taking a human life."

A suspicion was creeping up Harry's spine. Narrowing his eyes in doubt, he asked carefully, "Don't you...want me to kill him?"

Dumbledore watched him intensely and said, "No."

Something exploded inside Harry's core. "How can you—?!"

"I don't condone taking anyone's life," Dumbledore interrupted swiftly. "If I believed in such rough justice, I would have ended this struggle years ago. Less than a year ago, could I not have felled him? There were openings."

"*Why didn't you take them?!*" Harry burst out uncontrollably, with such force that he startled even himself. "Why didn't you end this *years* ago? Didn't you think during those openings that it would be worth a little rough justice or whatever the hell you called it to *save lives*? My *mum*! My *dad*! *Sirius*! I wouldn't be walking around with all the pain of having lost *three* parents eating me alive from the inside out! The Longbottoms! Wouldn't they have wanted to see their son grow up? Sirius' brother, the weak idiot, but maybe he could've been okay if he'd *lived*! The Crouch family, all of them! Voldemort ripped them apart and then killed them! I don't even know how many more people I could name that he did that to! *You* probably don't know how many more! And neither of us knows how many more are gonna die before this is over! I don't know it I can take losing any more people I care about! Hermione nearly died last time, what if it's her?! What if it's Ron?! What if it's Remus?! What if it's Hagrid?! What if it's *you*?! You said yourself, he'll come after you to get to me! Are you gonna care about justice and humanity when you're *dying*?!"

He found he was on his feet, screaming in Dumbledore's face so hard he was actually spitting, blood thundering through his body so hard it made him dizzy; he was charged with rage, his fists clenched as though he were about to strike Dumbledore with them as hard as he could now that he had run out of words with which to do so.

"Do I seem so heartless to you that you think I never thought of those names and those people over the course of the years that I have spent struggling with this?" Dumbledore asked in an even voice.

"Before now, I would never have said yes," Harry growled, choking down his emotions with difficulty.

"Please, Harry, I have not yet explained myself," Dumbledore said, still speaking quietly, gently. "I have reasons for my actions. Had I killed Voldemort, yes, the lives of the people you and I love would have been saved. But then what?"

"What do you mean, then what? Then we all could have lived normal, happy, *long* lives."

"Would there have been peace forever?"

Harry didn't answer.

"If Voldemort had not caused pain to so many, someone else would have risen to cause pain to many more. If we had simply cut him out of the world's history, we would never have learned from him, and if we are to ever make the world a truly good place, we must earn it. The goddesses granted us the gifts to feel not only love, but loss, so that we can understand and appreciate joy and not live our lives behind a shelter of naïveté. This is why you need to understand that Voldemort is a human—So that you know, when the time comes that you may hold his life in your hands, that anyone could have become what he has. You could have."

Feeling dizzy and weak, Harry slid into his chair again.

"But...no, I mean...Ganon and Voldemort, they both just want the Triforce of Power, but I...I use it for Courage, for good things..."

"There is a reason that the Triforce has three pieces," Dumbledore said. "None is omnipotent on its own, and none is more valuable than any other. It takes more than simply Din's Power to rule the world, and more than simply Farore's Courage to fight for it."

"It takes more than Nayru's Wisdom, too," Harry countered.

"It does," Dumbledore agreed, nodding. "It takes all three. Courage and Wisdom, in equilibrium with Power, can all support each other. That is why the legends told that it only one whose heart held all the elements in balance could harness the power of the goddesses and turn the world into a paradise."

...There's only Power, Courage, Wisdom—and what you do with them.

Harry couldn't speak for a moment. Just when he thought he understood things, Dumbledore always added a layer of confusion that was far too significant for him to ignore. Sinking back into his chair, he asked, to remove attention from his own tangled emotions, "What would you like to see happen to Voldemort? What would you like to do to him if you could?"

Dumbledore sighed thoughtfully. "I would like to show him the emotions he locks out. I would like him to know what it is to love unreservedly to the depths of his being, then know what it is to lose the person you so deeply love. I would like him to feel pride in an accomplishment and feel respected and loved for it. All he has ever felt is feared, to the point where he cannot even hold any respect for himself. His confidence is a carefully constructed illusion maintained by his followers. I would like for him to experience all the emotions which he has forced onto others, and then I would like him to live. With the full knowledge, with the true *understanding*, of what he has done to hundreds of innocent people."

All this sounded noble and just to Harry, who was sure that the right thing to do was probably to agree with Dumbledore and wish for the same thing. But it wasn't what he desired.

"I want him to feel pain," said Harry in a low voice, not meeting Dumbledore's eyes. "The pain of all his victims. And then I want to be the one to kill him."

This was, without a doubt, the most coldhearted and aggressive thing he had ever said. He had thought it to himself, in the unreal darkness of night, more times than he could count. Saying it aloud was different, and it sent a chill up his spine to hear his own words. But it was still true.

The two of them sat in silence for a long moment, as Harry's thoughts pounded in his mind along with his heartbeat. When Dumbledore spoke again, his tone was comparatively mild.

"What else did you come here to protest?"

At first, Harry couldn't remember. He blinked and frowned. Then, when the memory struck him, he said, "Research. All that useless research you're having Link and Zelda do when we could be setting up to fight Voldemort and Ganon. Or did you explain the reason for that just now in your cryptic little speech?" he added, feeling a pang of regret at the bitterness of his words even as he spoke them.

Inclining his head, Dumbledore asked curiously, "Do you really think all that research is useless?"

"Well...yeah! The history of the Ministry of Magic? Come on, I copy Hermione's notes on that stuff for tests, it's not important."

Dumbledore chuckled before adding seriously, "Is it useless for them to know the Unforgivable Curses?"

"Probably not," Harry muttered reluctantly.

"So you do understand the purpose of at least some of the research. And as for that which is less obviously relevant, some is because I don't know exactly what we will be facing, and I would like them to be adequately prepared for any challenge..."

Zelda had guessed that.

"...or simply to give them something to do. They have nothing but spare time, and this is a school, so they would do well to learn."

Link had guessed that.

"Why, though?" Harry asked. "Why can't we go fight? Why do we have to wait for them to make the first move?"

Dumbledore sighed and tented his fingers. "Harry, I wish I could give you a simple and definitive answer to that question, but there isn't one. Many small factors inhibit us. First of all, we are not ready. Link and Zelda have been here only a few days, and they are not yet prepared to go into combat."

Harry gave a disbelieving laugh. "You didn't see them in Defence Against the Dark Arts class," he countered.

With a small smile, Dumbledore said, "I will admit that their militaristic skills are not lacking, but they need more than that, as we just discussed. There is also the fact that we don't know exactly what Voldemort and Ganondorf are planning, a situation we in the Order are actively working to remedy. There are more minor details to consider, such as our own numbers compared to theirs, our resources, locations, timing, politics... War is quite simply not something we can charge into blindly, counting on the sheer strength of our weapons and our prayers to carry us through to victory."

Harry closed his eyes and dropped his face into his hands with a low groan. There was that confusion again. The complication that couldn't just let him live his life, that couldn't just let him understand exactly what he was supposed to do and give him the freedom to do it.

"Fine," he finally said in a dull voice, speaking into his hands. Lifting his face up to be more articulate, he repeated, "Fine. You're right. About everything."

"Not always."

Of course not. That would be too simple. And there were never simple answers to any hard questions.

"Yeah, well. I knew that," Harry countered. "You don't have the Triforce of Wisdom yet, do you?"

"No, I do not," Dumbledore agreed.

As always when he spoke with Dumbledore, Harry could tell instinctively that the conversation was over now.

He and the Headmaster said goodbye as Harry rose to leave; his hand was on the doorknob when Dumbledore called back, "Harry..."

Without a word, he looked back.

"Link told me about the conversation you had, the first night he came here," Dumbledore said softly, looking at Harry with those piercing blue eyes. "And I must say...it speaks volumes about Sirius' character that he is so clearly reflected in a man such as Link."

"You see it, too?" asked Harry, feeling relieved at this confirmation that he was not simply experiencing a grief-induced hallucination.

"I do," Dumbledore said with a nod. "Yourself, your father, Sirius, Link... You are all different incarnations of the same spirit."

Harry didn't quite know what to say. "Soon..." He choked, swallowed hard, and tried again. "Soon it'll just be me. Link will go, and it'll just be me..."

Shaking his head, Dumbledore corrected him, "They will all live on forever, in the ways in which they have touched the world. Just as you will do. It will never just be you, Harry. Never."

Despite himself, for no reason he could determine, Harry couldn't help cracking a smile at this. Maybe he was just going crazy. Or maybe somehow, in a way he couldn't possibly understand, things were starting to make sense.

Dumbledore smiled back, and Harry thought the Headmaster looked as if he could see into his mind. Maybe things were starting to make sense to him, too.

Chapter Twelve—Heart of a Lion

Dear Harry,

You can't imagine how much of a surprise it was for me to read the word "Hyrule" in your last letter. I have heard of the place, but I know nothing about it. Peter stumbled across it once, I think, in some book or another which only mentioned "the great, lost civilization of Hyrule, under the ocean." We fully intended to find out everything we could, and of course we talked about finding and excavating it one day, but it was only the next month that your father and Sirius put two and two together about me, and all our attention turned to the Animagus transformation. Hyrule fell onto the backburner, and we never thought about it again. I had forgotten about it entirely until you mentioned it.

So, thank you for answering the one question that Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs never really got around to.

Harry could almost hear Remus' sad smile in his voice, the one that silently spoke in the back of Harry's mind as he read the letter Hedwig had just brought him. Only one of their inseparable foursome had gotten to find out the truth about Hyrule.

It sounds like a fascinating place, and I'd love to get a chance to meet Zelda and Link firsthand. Dumbledore sent a letter to the Order about them as well, and he said that the three of you have gotten quite attached. Neither one of you really said much about their personalities, though. So what are they like? A noble queen and a great warrior?

Harry almost laughed out loud. Even as he sat in the common room, he could hear them bickering in the background from Link's dorm. ("Zel, I'm telling you, it's no big deal!" "I swear to all three goddesses, Link, sometimes...") Their arguments were as omnipresent as Ron and Hermione's, and twice as childish, not to mention entertaining. Strange how some people just showed their mutual affection that way.

Not much is new here. At least, not anything half so interesting as what's going on there. The usual occasional bits of information come in, but I don't think it's anything you would really care about. No, I'm not just saying that. No, I don't think you're too young to handle it.

And no, it's not just the fact that I don't want to put things like that in writing. It's the truth.

Keep me updated on how things are going on your end. Your match against Hufflepuff is coming up soon, isn't it?

Good luck!

From, Remus

Harry pulled out his own piece of parchment to scribble a reply to Remus, just enough to say that their Quidditch match was, in fact, the next day. He would send along a more in depth letter afterwards, and explain then about Zelda and Link: how they acted like normal people, how they were such great friends to each other and everyone else, how skilled they were, how interesting they were, how they both had a gift for knowing what people were thinking...

In short, how they just reminded him why every moment of life was worth living to the fullest.

Of course, Link and Zelda couldn't presume to be a part of life at Hogwarts without undergoing one critical experience: witnessing a Quidditch game.

Sadly, they had arrived too late in the years for the season opener of Gryffindor versus Slytherin, but the match against Hufflepuff also promised to be a good one. Over breakfast the Saturday morning of the game, Harry and Ron attempted to explain the rules of the game to the Hylians, something they had meant to do before (since the library books had proven to be not much help, being written mostly for people who already understood the sport) but hadn't gotten around to. It was not easy, since they had no reference sports like rugby or football to compare to. The whole concept of scoring points, having teams and players and positions, was really unlike anything they had in Hyrule. Zelda never had the luxury of childhood games, and Link's early years had been so full of play that there were really never any formal games with established rules and strategy; life was a game.

"Wait a minute," Link interrupted, after Harry explained about his role as Seeker. Harry waited patiently for the question, watching the

searching expression on Link's face as he tried to find words to explain what he didn't understand. "Okay," he said finally. "What's the point of the Snitch?"

Hermione shot a look at Ron, who was biting his lip to keep from laughing.

"My job, the Seeker's job, is to catch the Snitch," Harry reiterated. "When I do, that ends the game and gets our team a hundred and fifty points."

"Okay," Link said, nodding. "I think I get it."

"I don't," Zelda spoke up. "That is, I understand what you're saying, but...doesn't that make the rest of the players irrelevant?"

Harry and Ron stared at her, then each other. Irrelevant? How could any part of the airborne glory that was Quidditch be *irrelevant*?

"Yes, it does," Hermione answered. "The rest of the game is just to be entertaining, really, and it is fun to watch, but honestly." Nodding towards the boys, she rolled her eyes and added, "Try telling *them* that the world doesn't revolve around the Quidditch cup."

Zelda nodded sagely. "Ah. It's one of those things, is it?"

"Yes," Hermione agreed.

"One of what things?" Ron asked indignantly.

"One of those boy things that doesn't make any sense," Hermione informed him casually.

"Hey, that's not fair!" Ron objected. "Plenty of girls like Quidditch! What about Ginny?"

"What about me?" asked the Weasley daughter, snapping out of her own conversation a few seats away at the sound of her name.

"Get the rest of the team," Harry instructed her, stopping Ron and Hermione's argument in its tracks. "We should start getting ready for the match."

"Good luck," Hermione called as the two boys rose to leave, followed shortly by their five teammates.

When they were out of earshot, Link demanded of Zelda, "So what are some other 'boy things that don't make sense'?"

"Oh, you know," Zelda sighed. "All your fencing and archery and all that..."

"You like those things," he reminded her defensively. "And what about Sheik?"

"Sheik is a boy," she told him in her most dignified voice.

Link was unperturbed. "Sure he is. You just don't want to admit that I'm right," he decided, smirking.

"I like to spar with you now and then," the queen acknowledged, "but I can also think of any number of fun activities where nobody gets hurt. And I never understood why you and Chezdon felt the urge to settle every little dispute with a wrestling match."

"Because we're brothers," Link informed her, as if this should have been blindingly obvious. He was clearly poised to launch into a lecture on the value of the martial arts.

Hermione, however, cut him off with, "If you're ready, we should go down to the pitch to get good seats."

"Good idea," Zelda agreed, rising to her feet. The look she gave Link told him to drop it, and he only gave a small sigh of annoyance before complying.

Whatever happened today, Harry thought, they couldn't lose. He didn't ever want the Gryffindor team to fail to live up to their image, but especially not in front of Link and Zelda. It occurred to him that their opinions shouldn't have mattered to him, since they knew

nothing about the sport, but...for some inexplicable reason, he just wanted to impress them.

Somehow, he rather thought the rest of the team felt the same way. As they walked out onto the pitch, he noticed that all their gazes flicked up to the Gryffindor stands, where the Hylions (not wearing Hogwarts uniforms anymore) stood out colourfully against the mass of black.

"GO GRYFFINDOR!"

Amid the explosive cheers from all sides, Harry wondered if he was just imagining that he could hear one particular voice letting out realistically leonine roar. Whether or not it was a figment of his imagination, it made him grin as he shook hands with the Hufflepuff captain, who said, "Good to see you back, Potter."

"Thanks," Harry replied, smiling even wider. This time last year, he had been banned from playing Quidditch by Dolores Umbridge.

"Mount your brooms!" hollered Madam Hooch, and Harry and thirteen others did so. They were ready to spring into action, and Harry felt himself slipping into that zone of perfect unity with the pitch and his Firebolt and the game of Quidditch.

With a shrill whistle blast, the game began.

In the stands, Zelda jumped slightly in surprise when she saw how quickly Harry shot from the ground, leaving teammates and opponents alike in his wake.

"Wow!" exclaimed Link. "He can really fly, can't he?"

"He really can," Zelda agreed, a smile playing on her lips; Link sounded exactly like he always did when speaking about his daughters' accomplishments.

Meanwhile, Harry's thoughts were so completely focused and clear that they weren't even thoughts; they were instincts. His sense had reached their peak, and he was in a state of feline readiness to

pounce when he spotted his prey. The sound of the crowd was white noise, as was the commentary of Toby Wainwright.

This, Harry suddenly realized, was Occlumency.

His mind was blank and controlled, and he was aware of every corner of it. He was void of emotion. He existed in no space and time other than his own body, and there was nothing else in the universe except his broomstick and the Snitch.

And the Bludger that soared at his head. He dodged it easily, without thinking to do so. It didn't touch his pure mental state.

At long last, he really understood what he had been aiming for. It was as if his entire world had slipped into place.

Snitch!

The word popped into his mind when he saw the golden glimmer dart by, and he went to top speed instantly.

"What's Harry doing?" asked Zelda, shouting to be heard over the screaming crowd around her as she noticed a change in the Gryffindor Seeker's behaviour and watched him attentively. On either side of her, Link and Hermione had similarly become more alert. Hermione clasped her hands together in desperate anxiety, and Link was now leaning over the railing of the stands, so far that Zelda thought he was in danger of falling (or would have done if she had really been paying attention to him), holding onto it with a white-knuckled death grip.

"He spotted the Snitch!" Hermione shrieked, wringing her hands tightly. "Already!"

"COME ON, HARRY!" Link shouted. "COME—NO!"

For the Snitch and zoomed directly at a Bludger, and Harry was forced to dive slightly to avoid taking the metal ball to the face. In that brief second, he lost the Snitch. The Hufflepuff Seeker, however, whom Harry only now realized had been tailing him, didn't move quickly enough, and took the Bludger directly to the chest.

As the crowd groaned and shouted in empathetic pain, Harry saw the winded Seeker's face register stunned agony as he slipped on his broom. They were only about twenty feet from the ground, but it would still be a dangerous fall. Harry turned on the spot and made back towards his Hufflepuff counterpart, but the fifth-year boy, whose name Harry could never remember (something he felt guilty about now, for some reason, as if such a thing mattered at all at this moment of all times), only managed a pained gasp as he lost his grip and fell towards the ground.

"No!" Harry shouted out, reaching towards the falling boy. He grabbed desperately, but his hand closed on empty air.

The gasp from the crowd was audible, but the loudest voice was Zelda's.

"No!" she shouted, just as Harry had done, and she lunged forward in the stands even further than Link, reaching towards the young Hufflepuff. Of course she was much too far away to grab him, but she wasn't too far away for her magic to manage. It burst from her open palm in a blast of yellow light, just as a jet of blue shot from the other side of the stands, from Dumbledore's wand.

Both caught the boy, but Zelda's was more powerful. It stopped his fall unequivocally, engulfing him in yellow energy, before easing him slowly to the ground. Only when he had touched did Wainwright announce, "And the Hufflepuff captain is actually *not* bothering to call a time out as we investigate the condition of their Seeker."

Harry watched Madam Hooch swoop down to land before the wounded player, who looked to be unconscious where he lay in a pool of Zelda's magical energy. Madam Pomfrey as well was running to his side. As the light faded away, though, Harry could see his opponent's eyes fluttering open.

His opponent... Suddenly Harry remembered that he was in the middle of a game. Soaring upwards, he tried to pull his mind back to the task at hand, scanning the air all around him for the Snitch.

It was difficult to focus, though. Besides the fact that a voice in the back of his head was nagging him that it was unfair to get this head

start over the Hufflepuff Seeker, even though it was completely within the rules, he was still caught on what had just happened. He had never seen anyone unleash magical power that was greater even than Dumbledore's, especially without so much as the use of a wand. Of course, he had known Zelda was a great witch...but still...

"I hope he's all right," she was muttering worriedly in the stands, oblivious to the fact that as many people had their eyes on her as on the pitch.

"He'll be fine," Link assured her as he gave her shoulders a squeeze, though he sounded slightly concerned himself. "Just a Bludger, right? Harry and Ron said people get hit with them all the time."

Zelda made an annoyed noise in her throat, as though she doubted it, but moments later, the boy was climbing to his feet again. The spectators saw him lay a hand gingerly against his ribcage, but after a jab from Madam Pomfrey's wand, he nodded, picked up his broomstick from where it had fallen nearby, and took to the air again.

"He's okay, folks!" Wainwright shouted, as the match resumed its normal pace.

For twenty more minutes, they played on uninterrupted.

Harry began listening for the score, which would become more relevant to his strategy as it climbed higher. Currently it was forty to thirty for Hufflepuff, but he considered that a good one. It meant Ron was holding his own and remaining relatively calm. Pausing for a moment, he observed as one of the Hufflepuff Chasers wove towards Ron's end to shoot.

"Come on, Ron..." Harry muttered to himself.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw sudden movement. Looking up sharply, he saw the Hufflepuff Seeker zooming downwards. Harry's first impulse was to follow suit, but there was something odd about that dive. It didn't look direct enough, somehow.

Confirming Harry's suspicion, the Golden Snitch just then made its appearance elsewhere, circling only a few feet about the grass,

directly below Harry, who gave a shout of laughter. His opponent was feinting, and now it would backfire.

Pulling into an all but vertical dive, Harry thought how strange it must have looked to the crowd to see both Seekers plunging straight down towards different points.

"And Weasley blocks a shot from Hufflepuff Chaser Harcourt, throws the Quaffle to—Hey! The Seekers, both of them, look like they've spotted the Snitch! Obviously at least one of them's feinting, but which—?"

Hearing the commentary, the Hufflepuff Seeker abandoned his dive and looked around in bewilderment, but it was far too late. With exact precision, Harry used one hand to pluck the Snitch out of midair as he used the other to force his Firebolt back to a perpendicular angle with the ground, gliding to a slow enough speed that he could land.

The crowd exploded into vociferous cheering. As Hermione jumped up and down, making herself hoarse with screaming, Link lifted Zelda clear off the ground in a celebratory embrace. She laughed loudly, removing his hat to scruff up his hair and replacing it when he put her back down.

"GO GRYFFINDOR!" she and Hermione shouted in synchronicity, as Link roared again.

"Harry Potter catches the Snitch!" Wainwright shouted over the deafening roar. "Final score is one hundred eighty to Gryffindor, forty to Hufflepuff! GRYFFINDOR WIN!"

But his words were lost in the celebration of the crowd, who didn't need to be told the end result anyway. The students were frantically waving red and gold flags, posters featuring lions, and other Gryffindor insignias. They were already trampling their way down to the pitch to greet the victors, who had landed in a tangle of joyful embraces and handshakes. Hermione greeted Ron with a congratulatory kiss, and Harry was mobbed by people patting him on the back so many times that he felt like the epicentre of a small earthquake.

"Harry, that was amazing!"

"How did you know he was fainting?"

"That dive—awesome!"

"I thought you were going to crash!"

"Are you kidding me?"

The last voice hushed those around it, because they all knew who it belonged to.

"He knew exactly what he was doing," Link went on, smiling confidently down at Harry with his arms folded across his chest. "And I've gotta say, Harry...*that* is absolutely the best game I have ever seen."

This was better praise than all the rest put together. Harry felt himself grow taller.

"Thanks," he answered, trying not to sound too pleased with himself. Noticing something, he added, "Hey...where's Zelda?"

"Oh..." Link glanced around uncertainly.

"Right here," came the queen's voice, as she made her way through the Gryffindor crowd. "I just wanted to make sure that other boy was okay... Congratulations, Harry!" she said cheerfully, giving him a bright smile and a peck on the cheek.

"Thanks," he said again, hoping his grin didn't look as stupid as it felt.

"*Party!*" shouted Dean Thomas, a few feet away, and the Gryffindors roared their approval.

Someone grabbed Harry from behind, and he found himself and his teammates being hoisted high onto the shoulders of their fellow Gryffindors as they all paraded back to the castle, chanting victoriously at the tops of their lungs.

"GO! GO! GRYFFINDOR! GO! GO! GRYFFINDOR!"

Ron was still in bed, having been up well past midnight the night before; so was Link, and it was just lucky for him that souls couldn't get hangovers. Hermione had been up early to head to the library and get some essay writing done; possibly Zelda had gone with her, unless she needed to recover from the excessive festivities of the night before as much as Link did, which was a distinct possibility. Because the victory party and its after effects had lasted the rest of Saturday, it was the middle of Sunday morning before Harry got a chance to sit down before the fireplace and write the full letter to Remus that he had intended. As Harry launched into a play by play description of the finer points of the match, the letter grew longer and longer.

"Who are you writing to?"

Zelda stood behind him. Looking up at her, upside down, Harry answered, "Oh...just an old friend of my dad's who's a friend of mine now."

Owl post, while Harry, Ron and Hermione had of course explained it when Hermione had received the *Daily Prophet*, had startled the Hylians anew when the term had started. At the first breakfast they ate with everyone in the Great Hall, they had been slightly alarmed when hundreds of owls had swooped in and begun raining letters and packages down on everyone, but they were used to it by now, and both quite liked Hedwig, though she still avoided them suspiciously. Harry suspected that she was mistrustful because she could tell these people were neither human nor alive. Crookshanks held out the same wariness, though he was coming to terms it, and Pig, as always, just loved everyone.

With a smile, Zelda circled around the fireside armchair in which Harry sat and said, "That's nice, that you can keep in touch with someone who knew your father. Do you know many of his old friends?"

Harry shook his head, looking back down at his parchment. "Just the one," he said simply, not wanting to get into it.

Zelda didn't reply at first. Then she said gently, "Link told me about your godfather."

"Oh," Harry said heavily, feeling dread settle into his stomach.

"I know what you mean," the queen agreed with a faint sigh that betrayed more sadness than Harry suspected she had intended it to. "I saw my own parents...everything I loved...murdered, when Ganondorf took over Hyrule."

Harry blinked, though he still hadn't looked up at her.

"I felt so horrible afterwards," she went on quietly, half speaking to herself. "I *knew* that Ganondorf was evil, and I'd tried to warn them...and I still felt like it was my fault when they didn't listen, even though he..." She paused, staring off into the distance. "It took me years to accept that the problems of the world weren't all my responsibility."

"But...you're the queen," Harry pointed out, glancing up to meet her eye.

"Yes. I'm not destiny, though. No one is. You deal with what comes, and don't let it eat you alive. You react to things with action aimed towards the future, not with regrets aimed towards the past, because you can't change that..."

Harry knew that. He had learned in third year that trying to change the past wasn't something anyone had the right to do, even if they had the ability.

"Well, unless you're Link," Zelda corrected herself with a slight laugh, even as Harry thought this, "in which case you just happen to have the ability to travel through time, and destiny actually expects you to learn from the future. For the rest of us, though, life only flows one way, so it's best to just go with it."

Harry didn't answer. It was amazing to him, sometimes, how a brief conversation like this could make him feel better. Zelda had been through the same thing he had, and she had come out not only all right, but better for it.

"Thanks," he said quietly.

Apparently understanding, Zelda gave him a small smile and nodded.

After a pause, during which Harry returned to his letter and Zelda was contented with her thoughts, she asked in her usual polite way, "I don't mean to interrupt, but...have you seen Link?"

Frowning, Harry said slowly, "I thought he was still in bed. Or else with you."

"And I thought he was with you."

Panic began to rise within Harry, but died down when something occurred to him. "Can't you just use your telepathy to contact him?"

"I could," Zelda acknowledged uneasily. "I don't like to when I don't know what he's doing, though, unless it's an emergency. I don't want to interrupt anything I shouldn't. We sort of have an agreement about that sort of thing."

"Oh... Doesn't this count as an emergency?" Harry suggested. "If we don't know where he is?"

"I don't think so. He can take care of himself, so I shouldn't worry. Besides, you don't know where Ron and Hermione are right now, but would that count as an emergency?"

"Hermione's in the library, as usual, working on...I'm not sure what, and Ron's in bed," Harry replied automatically. "And if you shouldn't worry about Link, then why are you worried?"

"I don't know," she sighed casually, crossing her arms. "Probably because he can just be such a little boy sometimes, I half expect him to show up all covered in mud or something with that sheepish little grin and a well-rehearsed excuse for—"

She cut herself off with a small gasp of mild surprise.

"What is it?" Harry demanded instantly, sitting straight up.

"Hold on..." said Zelda vaguely, and her eyes slipped out of focus in a way that Harry recognized by now as meaning that she was using

telepathy. Apparently Link had contacted her first. After a pause, she muttered, "Oh, the idiot... I knew he was going to do that eventually. See, this is what I'm talking about."

"What did he do?" Harry asked nervously.

"Went into the woods," Zelda sighed, waving out the window at the Forbidden Forest.

"*What?*" Harry yelled, jumping to his feet. "Why would he do that?!"

Looking overtly surprised at what she clearly thought was a dramatic overreaction, Zelda reminded him, "He grew up in a forest. That's the kind of place he loves."

"But it isn't safe like Kokiri Forest!" Harry objected. "There's all sorts of monsters and things in there!"

With a bit of a smile, though she was clearly trying to conceal it, Zelda said placatingly, "Harry, Kokiri Forest may be safe, but it's attached to the Lost Woods, which definitely isn't. Link's childhood haunts were absolute death traps, to be honest. He's just lost, that's all, and he needs some help finding his way out. He can find his way around any and all woodlands in Hyrule with any number of tricks and techniques, but I guess his skills don't work in such a different environment."

Despite Zelda's words, and despite the fact that he knew Link was probably a match for anything in the Forbidden Forest, Harry couldn't ignore the knot in his stomach. There were centaurs, and Grawp, and who could say what else...

The more Harry thought about it, the more panicked and the more certain he became that something horrible had happened to Link.

"Zelda, we have to find him," he insisted firmly.

Though she still looked more concerned about Harry than Link, the Hylian queen consented, "Yes, I was just about to go."

"Come on!"

And Harry was gone out of the portrait hole, without further hesitation, knowing that Zelda would have no difficulty in keeping up. He tore through the all but empty halls, flung wide the main entrance, and sprinted across the smooth grounds towards the mammoth, looming darkness of the Forest. As he approached the edge, though, he slowed to a halt, heart sinking.

"What's wrong?" asked Zelda, catching up to him. "Did something happen?"

"Well...no... It's just, that's a big forest, and I have no idea where he is in there..."

"Of course you don't," the queen said unconcernedly. "That's why we have to look for him."

With that, she ventured forward, supremely unafraid.

"Hey!"

Harry wasn't about to let anyone walk into the Forbidden Forest alone, even if she was an undying spirit. She could still get lost, or be victimized by any number of other things. He ran after her.

"Link!" she was calling loudly. "Link, can you hear me?"

Shouting out didn't strike Harry as the wisest course of action. "Er...Zelda?" he spoke up uneasily.

"Yes, Harry?"

"What if...someone other than Link hears you? Monsters or something?"

Pausing to look around Zelda creased her brow thoughtfully and admitted, "Oh, I suppose you're right. But I think I can handle any sorts of beasts you have here."

Possible objections died in Harry's throat as he remembered this woman's exploits. Hadn't she been at Link's side every time he'd saved the world? Hadn't she trained in every form of combat there

was? Hadn't her last incarnation, Tetra, been the leader of a band of pirates? She was Dumbledore's ancestor, after all, and Godric Gryffindor's, and, he remembered, his own.

They continued, keeping on the path, as per Harry's advice, and shouting for Link as they went. Harry's robes snagged frequently, but Zelda's dress less so, because spirit matter seemed magically immune to such things.

Darkness spread around them, growing more complete. Harry lit his wand ("*Lumos.*") and Zelda herself gave off a faint glow. The echoes of their voices carried less and less as the thickness of the trees stifled them.

Harry was about to suggest that they turn back, because Link couldn't have wandered this far, when Zelda said, "He must have gone off the path somewhere before here. Stupid idiot!" The insult was, Harry knew, just a sign that she was worried.

"You have no right to criticize the intelligence of others," came a cool voice, "when you have committed the same folly."

Harry froze, electrocuted with terror. He knew who was speaking.

"Magorian?" he asked, feeling his heart sink fearfully.

The chestnut centaur came into sight, bow in hand, nocked and ready to fire. Although the weapon was pointed at Zelda, he himself glared at Harry.

"You," he said. "We have warned you enough times not to come into our forest. Young though you may be, you have now not only have defied us, but brought another human here..."

Harry noticed on some level that it was odd that Magorian was alone. But then, the last time he had seen the centaurs, Grawp had been on a violent rampage against them. Their numbers must have been considerably diminished.

Thinking quickly, wildly grasping at straws, and praying Zelda would have the sense to go with his story, he blurted, "But she's not a human. She's an elf."

Doubt flashed in Magorian's eyes, but he quickly replaced it with stony anger again. "An elf? She is no elf. Those people are a myth, a creation of Muggles with overactive imaginations."

"No, it's true!" To Zelda, he said desperately, "Show him your ears. That proves it."

Bewildered, but clearly accepting that Harry must have known what he was saying, Zelda lifted her hair to show the distinctive feature of her race.

Magorian lowered his weapon slightly, but more out of confusion than trust. He looked her over slowly, noticing that she didn't look quite real, and Harry could practically see him thinking that perhaps Harry was telling the truth.

"And...and...you know how elves love the forest," Harry went on, talking to keep Magorian from killing them. Centaurs weren't like giants, he knew, who would lash out when they were required to think too hard. They would rather rationalize. "I told her not to come in here, but she's just got this affinity for nature—"

"Who else is here?" the centaur interrupted, raising his bow again. "She said there was someone else."

"No one," Harry said quickly. "We—She thought that her friend, this other elf, had come in here, but we couldn't find him, so we're just leaving. I only came in here in the first place to get them out of your forest. Her, I mean. Because the other one's not here. He can't be, can he, or you'd have found him by now, and since you haven't, he must not be here."

Magorian looked suspicious. However, he was also still looking at Zelda carefully. Maybe he didn't believe she was an elf, but he certainly didn't know what she *was*, and it was obvious he weighing the risks of threatening someone who was such an unknown quantity.

"We were just leaving your forest," Harry repeated.

"Yes," said Magorian slowly. "Good. Get out. I will not be so forgiving if I find either of you here again, or your friend."

"Thank you," said Harry, feeling slightly faint with relief as he backed away. He had a feeling that confronting Magorian wouldn't have been so terrifying if the setting hadn't been so sinister, but as it was, he was ready to get out of this place and let Link fend for himself. He was armed, he knew what he was doing. He'd be fine.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the centaur, Zelda said, "I suppose we really are leaving, then? He looked like he was ready to carry out on his threat."

"Yeah," Harry agreed uneasily, his heart rate still not quite normal, looking around and wishing his wandlight illuminated a greater area. "But we should check if Link's around here... Can't you make a magic light or something?"

"Yes," Zelda replied, "but I don't want to. It would definitely disrupt the natural environment here if we lit the place up, and I doubt its inhabitants would be too pleased with us."

Now Harry, seeing the sense in this, wished he had no light. "Oh," he said, lowering his wand. "Let's just go back then, I guess." He tried to sound nonchalant, but he didn't think he had succeeded. At any rate, Zelda didn't seem to notice; possibly she was too busy worrying about Link. He may not have been her husband, but he was still half of her life.

"Yes," she said again, though Harry didn't think she had really been listening. "We'll keep calling for him, though."

As they walked back along the path, calling out uncertainly into the darkness, Harry strained his eyes in the hope of seeing daylight again.

"Harry," Zelda asked suddenly, "you've been in here before, right?"

"Er...yeah, a few times."

"Have you ever wandered off the path?"

It was Zelda who was now trying to sound nonchalant, when really she felt anything but. Harry could hear it in her tone.

"Once or twice," he replied evasively.

Zelda stopped in her tracks. Harry panicked momentarily, until he saw the familiar look of telepathic concentration on her face. Blinking, she informed him, "Link is close. I can feel his presence in my—"

She stopped, and when Harry opened his mouth to ask why, she placed a finger to her lips to silence him. She was listening intently, and though Harry didn't hear anything, he remembered Hermione's words about how Hylians could pick up a greater range of sounds. He wished his heart would beat more quietly, because to judge by the way Zelda was looking around, something was coming.

Or many somethings...

"Link?" asked Harry hopefully.

Next second, he just caught himself from letting out a scream when Link, silently as a cat, dropped from the branches overhead onto the path. He didn't look afraid, because he was never afraid, but he was certainly on the edge.

"Harry," he said in a whisper, "Zelda. Very quietly...run."

"Link, what—?"

But he was already darting down the path, nimbly dodging branches and bushes, and Harry and Zelda had to follow quickly or risk losing him. He was certainly good at moving with both speed and silence. No wonder the centaurs hadn't found him.

When they caught up with him, Zelda asked in a low, angry hiss, "Link, what in the name of Nayru is going on?"

Without answering, he stopped in his tracks, looking around with wide eyes. Harry realized why; there was a faint rustling sound coming from the bushes, all around them, coming closer...

"I think...Ghoma...Skulltula..." he whispered, half to himself.

As the word escaped his lips, Harry saw something move in the foliage. Something horribly familiar.

"Aragog..." he breathed.

The sound stopped. Yet Harry knew, as he carefully looked at the surrounding forest, that the offspring of the Acromantula had them encircled.

Why had they snuck up, though?

"Link," Zelda growled, inching closer to him and eyeing what was visible of the arachnids that surrounded them, "what did you do?"

"Nothing," Link hissed back defensively. "I was just looking around, and I found... Well, I guess it's their nest or lair or something... There was this one huge one, and it didn't see me, but I figured I should get away. I was trying to get out of there without bothering them, but..." He paused and frowned. "They followed me. I tried to sneak away and lose them, but apparently that didn't work. And here we are."

Slowly, gradually, more and more spiders were appearing. Harry felt his heart sink to his knees. Maybe the feral Ford Anglia would save them, he thought fleetingly. If it didn't, he could see no hope...

"You shouldn't have come here, Harry," Link said. "You could get killed."

"Me? I've gotten away from these things before," Harry informed him, feigning confidence.

"Besides, it's your fault they found us in the first place," Zelda reminded Link sternly. "Why did you wander off the path in the first place?"

"Because I'm used to the Lost Woods, where staying on the path can be more deadly than leaving it. The whole place is one big—"

He cut himself off when one of Aragog's young pounced from its hiding place to attack. Zelda gasped, Harry gave a shout of surprise, and Link cried out viciously as he leapt forward and swung the Master Sword down hard, severing one of the great monster's legs. It let out a furious clicking and a faint scream of pain, stumbling back and bleeding freely from the gaping wound. Harry would have felt sick with disgust, but there was no time.

Link's attack had taken one instant, and in the next, it was chaos. Every hidden spider sprang from its coverage to launch itself at the ones who had wounded their fellow.

Spells were flying instantly, from Harry's wand and Zelda's bare hands; Link continued to make efficient use of his steel. They held their own, but the flow of spiders was endless.

"We have to do something else!" shouted Harry. "*Stupefy!* This can't—*Petrificus Totalus!*—go on forever!"

"Zelda!" Link ordered. "Nayru's Love!"

Though the queen said nothing, she must have understood, because she grabbed Harry by the shirt and pinned him against her with one arm. This, however, didn't startle him half as much as what happened at the same time, as she raised the other hand over her head before touching it to the ground at her feet. From the point she had touched, there spread a blue crystal that encapsulated her and Harry both.

Yet, even as Harry recovered from this dizzying surprise, Link provided another. He had sheathed his weapon and now clasped his hands to his chest; he then swung both arms in a wide circle, one forward and one backward, before thrusting his left hand down. For a fraction of a second, Harry thought that Link was casting the same spell as Zelda had done, until he realized that this was not a shimmering blue crystal, but a dome of lethal, red fire.

It expanded to conflagrate everything in sight, the trees and bushes and spiders alike, but, by some miracle, Link, Zelda and Harry remained unharmed.

Even this inferno of apocalyptic strength didn't stop the hoard of beasts. Those in its range died instantly, their bodies burned away, but there were more moving in to replace them. This battle would never end.

For a moment, the Hylians locked eyes, communicating at the speed of thought, then they darted in opposite directions, Zelda pulling Harry along so he could stay within the blue crystal that went with her.

"Zelda—!" he began to shout.

"I'll explain later," she told him shortly. Even as she spoke, she swung one arm in another complicated motion to cast a spell, and Harry saw and felt a green wind sweeping them both away. His own body disappeared...

"He'll be killed!"

Instantaneously, the magical wind which had caught both Harry and Zelda rematerialized them outside the Forest. The blue safety zone was flickering away as well, but Zelda was still holding Harry's arm tightly. He tried fiercely to break free of her grip— He wasn't going to let another innocent person die to save him, not after his mother and father and Sirius... Not Link, too...

"Stop, Harry!" Zelda ordered, pulling him back forcefully. "Link can't die, remember? He's a spirit!"

Of course; Harry had briefly forgotten this. He stopped fighting, but he still stared desperately at the trees, as if by so doing he could see through them to help or at least find Link.

"He can get hurt, though," Harry mumbled, half to himself. "He.. He..."

"He'll be fine," Zelda said gently, slipping an arm over his shoulders maternally. "Now that I've set up a warp point, he can teleport out here once he's done what he's intended."

"Why couldn't he teleport before?"

"Oh, he could always teleport. He just doesn't know how to set up a warp point and use it at the same time, like I did." She shook her head, smiling slightly. "He may be one of the most magically powerful beings in the world, but I never could teach that boy to use his powers properly."

There was a pause before Harry asked, "And...and what is Link intending to do?"

Zelda didn't answer for a moment. It was only when very obvious wariness that she finally replied, "He's going to kill their leader."

"He—*What?*"

Harry made again to run into the trees, but again Zelda pulled him back. He gave in, but only because he couldn't make up his mind what he was most horrified about. As much as he dreaded Aragog, and considered the whole colony of Acromantulas to be monsters, he still didn't think it was a good idea to kill the brood's patriarch. The smaller ones would all want to avenge their parent. And Hagrid considered Aragog a friend, for whatever reason, so...so... Did that mean the bloodthirsty monster deserved to live? Or to die?

Harry stared at the trees, trying to make up his mind. Aragog had never killed anyone. He had consciously chosen not to, out of loyalty to Hagrid. His children, as well, would never harm the groundskeeper, but they had tried to kill him and Ron, and now Link and Zelda, and Aragog hadn't hindered them. So...

In the end, it didn't matter. Link would do it whether Harry wanted him to or not. The Master Sword had slain many demons and monsters, and surely a few people, in Link's hands. And it had killed a Basilisk in Harry's. Now it would draw fresh blood.

Harry just hoped that Link knew what he was doing, so that at least one of them would.

"Do you think he'll be—?"

There was a bright green flash, and Link stood there, crimson blood slicking easily off the silver blade of the Master Sword to leave it as immaculate as if it had just been forged. He sheathed it on his back and shook his head.

"That was a close one," he commented, exhaling heavily.

"Did Aragog do something to you?" asked Harry edgily.

"Aragog?" Link echoed blankly.

"Oh...the big spider's name is Aragog."

"Ah. I was calling it Ghoma. She was a giant spider I had to kill when I was ten... Anyway, yeah, Aragog tried to take a piece out of me, but I finished it off."

Harry felt strangely numb. Just like that, so quickly and indifferently, Aragog was dead...

"And that's not the close call I meant," Link went on. His voice had gone distinctly paternal, and Harry suspected a lecture was coming. It was Zelda, however, who spoke first.

"Don't you blame him," she told Link warningly, putting her hands on her hips. "You should have known he would want to help if he thought you were in trouble. That's what you always did in the same circumstances, and still do. And frankly, if he wasn't ready for that battle—I'm not saying you weren't Harry, but *if* you hadn't been—then that wouldn't be his fault, either. You're the one who's supposed to be training him."

Link stared at his queen, and Harry thought he looked as if he hadn't understood a word she'd just said.

"You know I'm right," she added when he didn't speak, folding her arms bossily and scowling at him much as Harry thought she would have done if Link was in trouble for putting a bug in her hair or some other transgression. He reflected briefly on how odd, and almost impressive, it was that they could continue to sound as old as they looked, like teenage siblings bickering, even while debating matters of life and death.

With a grunt of concession, Link rolled his eyes and mimicked Zelda's gesture. "Fine," he snapped sulkily, "but I'm still not admitting I was wrong. Because I wasn't."

Now Zelda mimicked him, rolling her own eyes. "Sure you weren't. Come on, let's go back up to the castle."

Chapter Thirteen—Armed against the Dark Lords

Now Harry had even more work to do. It had always been that when he wasn't doing homework, he was training for Quidditch. A newly added dimension, however, was that when he wasn't doing either of those things, Link had taken to hauling him outside to train with a bow and the Master Sword. Where he had gotten bows for each of them from remained a mystery, though Harry suspected Dumbledore had something to do with it. That didn't matter, though; what was important was the Harry was learning to use the two magical weapons necessary to defeat Ganondorf and Lord Voldemort.

"I thought I just needed the sword," Harry said in confusion the first time Link handed him a bow and quiver of arrows.

"No, the Master Sword's just half of the battle. The more famous half, but still just half. You also need the Light Arrows, and for that, you've gotta use *this*." He nodded towards the projectile weapon.

"I don't know how to shoot a bow," Harry objected, frowning at it. "I've never even held one."

Link shrugged. "It's not hard."

"Of course not for you, you're an elf."

"A...what? You mean one of those little things that lives in the kitchen?"

"No," said Harry, surprised. "Those are house-elves. I mean normal elves... Aren't you one?"

Link inclined his head in curious bewilderment. "I don't think so... Am I? What's an elf?"

Each of them was clearly at a complete loss to understand what the other was talking about. Harry had assumed, since Link dressed in green, had pointed ears, used a bow, and lived in the forest, that he was an elf. But then, he thought, Link was a Hylian; not all Hylians acted that way, and much of his behaviour was carried over from

growing up among children in the forest as a Kokiri. So apparently the two races, elves and Hylians, weren't synonymous.

"Oh," said Harry slowly, "I guess not. Don't worry about it, then."

Though he continued to frown thoughtfully, Link consented to let it go. "All right. So let's see your archery skills."

Harry gave a snort of laughter at the word "skills." Just so long as Malfoy or Snape didn't see him, he wouldn't be too embarrassed. He hoped.

The first lesson consisted mostly of Link finding out what Harry could already do, both with a bow and a sword. They had already discovered by the time Link handed Harry the former that he was much more proficient with the latter, having apparently awakened some unknown talent within himself the first time he held the legendary blade in combat against the Basilisk; however, it also seemed that he harboured a similar long-hidden gift regarding archery. The first few arrows he shot flew almost randomly, but after a few attempts, he found he had a reasonable degree of control over his weapon. Of course, he was nowhere near as swift as Link, who hit a large pinecone hanging from a tree at the edge of the Forbidden Forest at a distance of fifty feet, and then muttered that he was out of practice because he hadn't struck it dead centre.

"What?" he asked, seeing Harry gaping at him.

"You expect me to get *that* good?" Harry demanded.

Link laughed. "No, I don't expect you to devote your life to this stuff. I did, see, so by now you can imagine I've gotten the hang of it. You, on the other hand, I just expect you to get proficient. When I was your age, I'd never held a bow, either. Slingshot, yes, and that was a good introduction, but that's it. Anyway, some pointers. Let me fix your grip here..."

Besides being a good warrior, Link was also a good teacher. He had, of course, passed on his knowledge to both of his daughters, as well as countless soldiers in Zelda's army, and so he definitely knew what he was doing. Occasionally he could be tough, when the military

leader in him started to show through, but generally he managed to remember that he was dealing with a typical teenage boy who was more used to seeing a bow in movies, television or video games than in real life. It helped that Harry definitely found something appealing about the idea of learning to use medieval weapons. How many sixteen-year-old, even wizards, could boast that skill? And imagine the look on Dudley's face if he pointed a *bow* at it!

The sun was just passing its zenith in the sky when Link declared that Harry had practiced enough for one day. Though it was the hottest part of the day, it was still quite cool out, because it was mid February. All in all, however, this winter had been a mild one thus far.

"I guess we should go in, then," Harry said, imitating Link by slinging his own bow and quiver onto his back.

For a moment, Link didn't answer as he looked out over the grounds.

"Er...Link?" Harry asked, stepping in front of him. "Are we going in?"

"Not quite yet," said Link slowly. "The lesson's not over."

"What? But you just said..."

Smiling widely, Link corrected him, "*Your* lessons are over. But I still have a few things to learn."

Completely confused, Harry asked cautiously, "Such as?" If he knew Link, this was going to be something bizarre...

"How to fly."

Or not.

Harry laughed. "You want a go on my Firebolt?"

"Damn straight," Link agreed, still grinning.

Even if Harry had wanted to, there was no way he could have said no to the irascible, stubborn and superlatively amiable Hero of Time. No one ever could; he just had that effect on people.

"Okay, sure." Pointing his wand towards the window he knew to lead to the Gryffindor Tower, Harry called, "*Accio Firebolt!*"

Moments later, the Summoned broom zoomed into sight from the window in question, and came to a halt right before Harry, who looked at Link.

"There you go."

"Thanks!" Link said, grabbing it and throwing off his weapons to mount. Before he took off, he paused to ask, "Anything I should know about this? Like how to do it?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't think so. I figured it out on my own, so you should be fine. You know how to ride a horse, right, so it can't be that different."

"Good point," Link agreed with a nod. "I like the way you think, Harry...mostly because it results in me getting what I want."

As Harry laughed, he took off, and soared away over the trees with a whoop of elation. Nothing could beat the adrenaline rush of that first flight, and Harry wished for a moment that he could have been Link just to feel it again.

Momentarily, the Hylan swooped down near Harry, rolling upside down and laughing, "I don't know why we never—oops..."

He reached to try to grab his hat as it fell from his head, but missed. It was probably the first time he had ever not cared, as he simply shrugged, righted himself, and darted off again.

"You're letting someone else on your Firebolt?" came a disbelieving voice behind Harry. He knew who it was, and his stomach knotted strangely when he turned to see Ginny standing there with her own broom slung over her shoulder and one eyebrow raised sceptically in Link's direction.

"Sure," Harry agreed with a shrug. "I've let Ron on it before."

"And I never understood that."

Harry gave a short laugh. "I trust him. Don't you trust your own brother?"

Ginny made a face. "If I had a Firebolt, I wouldn't let him within fifty feet of it. And *he* is an accident looking for a place to happen," she added, nodding towards Link as he looped repeatedly in the air. The corners of her mouth twitched.

"He knows what he's doing," Harry told her confidently. He surprised himself at how much he believed this, but Link really didn't seem to be having the slightest difficulty flying. Maybe it really was like riding a horse. "Anyway, what are you up to?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Practice," Ginny replied, shrugging and still watching Link. "You've got the key to the shed, right? I need a Quaffle."

"Oh, yeah, sure," Harry muttered absently, patting his pockets down to find the keys that he, as a Quidditch captain, had earned. "Here you go," he said when he found them.

"Thanks... Hey, you wanna practice with me?" she suggested as she took them from him.

"I can't, Link's got my broom," Harry pointed out.

But, as if on cue, Link swooped down and dismounted before the Firebolt had come to a complete stop (reaching as he did to grab up his hat off the grass and replace it where it belonged), then handed it back to its owner with a grin.

"Nope, I'm done."

"Oh...thanks," said Harry, slightly bewildered, as he accepted the broom.

"Besides, I couldn't get in the way of your practice. I'm rooting for you, right?"

Somehow, Harry doubted that Link was just referring to Quidditch, but he tried to not let his irritation show. Not that he really understood why he was irritated to begin with. He and Ginny were friends, so

there shouldn't have been anything awkward or embarrassing about spending time with her. Right?

"Right," he said shortly.

"Great," Link agreed, beaming as he clapped Harry on the shoulder. "I'll go in, I guess. Zel's gonna be wondering where I am."

"Let's hit the pitch," Ginny said, taking Harry by the arm, and leading him away as Link, too, headed off, but not before giving a last wink in Harry's direction. "I don't really know how I can help you practice, but you can keep for me while I shoot." She flashed him a grin. "Ever played Keeper before?"

"Er...no, actually."

"You'll be fine. Can't be that hard, if Ron does it."

Harry laughed, but also asked, "Are you always this insulting to him, and I just haven't noticed?"

Looking thoughtful, but smiling, Ginny replied, "No, I think it's just something I picked up as a habit since Fred and George moved out. Ron might complain, he always did, but he'd really miss it if no one was around to say 'I care' by saying 'You're stupid.' What else are siblings for?"

They came to a halt by the equipment shed, and as Ginny dug around in one of the boxes for a Quaffle, it occurred to Harry that she was really quite smart like that sometimes, about feelings and everything. This seemed to be a girl thing in general, but still, Ginny in particular paid attention to the people closest to her—

"Heads up!"

His train of thought was interrupted by a Quaffle flying at his head, which he just managed to catch before it made contact.

"Whoa! A little warning might be nice!"

She smirked at him, casually tossing another Quaffle in her hand. "But then I wouldn't get to see that look on your face."

Though he had been getting hungry when his practice with Link ended, Harry quickly forgot about his stomach once he got into Quidditch. They practiced for about an hour before he remembered it...or rather, it reminded him of itself by loudly announcing its displeasure at being denied food.

"Oh, haven't you had lunch yet?" asked Ginny in surprise.

"No," Harry said. "I was practicing with Link all morning."

"Practicing? Practicing what?" she inquired curiously, following as he swooped down to land. He was feeling sort of tired, now that he thought about it. Probably just hunger.

"He was teaching me some of that fighting stuff," Harry answered vaguely, not really thinking about his words as he said them. More of his attention was on the strange dizziness that had sudden sprung into his mind when he had touched the ground... He definitely didn't feel well...

"Cool! Like what?"

Harry brought a hand to his head... Strange... This headache wasn't from his scar...

"Are you okay, Harry?"

His broom slipped from his fingers, but he didn't notice... He staggered, the world blinking in and out of focus...

"Harry? What's wrong?"

He was hardly aware of himself hitting the ground, or Ginny's scream as she grabbed him, before his consciousness was overtaken by other things.

The scene wasn't a cohesive one; it flowed blurrily, and Harry couldn't understand it. A man was sitting at a large, mahogany desk in a large,

dark room. His long-fingered, thin, pale hands held letters written in code, and his violently red eyes looked them over. A few phrases jumped out as he flipped through them.

S: HW leaders half-moon twice

...centre full...

...going with nothing...

Rs: Darling active; QR angry...

With a sigh, Voldemort dropped the papers to his desk, apparently displeased with this information, or perhaps simply bored by it.

"Useless idiots," he muttered in his high, cold voice, closing his eyes and rubbing his temples.

Wham.

The imposing door to the room entered, and the heavy footsteps of a dark figure with a sweeping cape approached the desk firmly.

Thump.

Two large, tough-skinned, leather clad fists dropped onto the desk's dusty surface on their knuckles and ground against it. Voldemort looked up from the hands to the arms to the face.

"What are we waiting for?" growled Ganon's deep voice. His teeth were bared in a snarl of anger, his red eyes flashing. The dim firelight caught the gem set in his forehead and made it glimmer angrily, as though it were growling. His image was certainly an aggressive, physical elaborate one, in contrast to the clean, distant elegant danger that Voldemort preferred.

"I have already told you, we can do nothing while the boy is at Hogwarts," Voldemort replied, an edge of irritation in his otherwise calm voice.

"Then why did you even bring me here? You expect me to sit quietly and wait 'til you're ready—"

"I am focusing my attention on other tasks. If you are willing to help, I would be glad to let you."

Ganon punched the desk. "Other tasks! You'd like me to be one of your lapdogs, too? Your Death Eaters, or whatever it is you call them? I am not that weak! I'm not like you, you who sit here in your manor like a king, not fighting your own battles against a mere *child*—"

Voldemort rose to his feet. He stood taller than Ganondorf, but not enough that his height was intimidating to the King of Evil. "And, by contrast, you *did* fight your battle against a child, and lost!"

"*You* failed to kill an unarmed baby!"

"You have, time and again, been defeated by mere Muggle weapons!"

"Weapons forged for the sole purpose of defeating me! And I have never died! I live on!"

"As do I!"

"But you've given up control of your conflict with your infernal *waiting* and inactivity! You brought me here to end the battle with the child who is the bane of your existence, but now it's shaping up to a conflict involving the entire Triforce!"

"What?" Voldemort demanded.

Ganon sneered victoriously. "Your loyal *Death Eaters* are useless at gathering information that matters. If my Gerudo warriors were here, you would have learned long ago that the Hero of Time and his damn queen have returned."

Striding around the desk in two steps and toppling his chair in the process, Voldemort snapped, "What? When did this happen? Where are they now? Who did this? As if I don't know."

"Your enemies at Hogwarts, of course, raised them under the last full moon."

Voldemort let out a serpentine hiss. "You mean their *souls* have risen, thanks to Dumbledore and that horror of a child." He swore angrily, and Ganondorf let out a grunt of agreement.

"So, your lordship, or whatever you call yourself, I would advise you to rethink your priorities. This is the crisis at hand. If we can't touch them at the castle, as you say, then get them the hell out of there."

Through gritted teeth, Voldemort said, "What do you think I have been working on? I cannot simply extend them an invitation. This will require careful planning, as they have both known me long enough to grow wise to some of my most brilliant plans. My schemes are rarely simple. They can't be when so much is at stake."

"All I know is, Link will go anywhere if he thinks there's heroics to be done... stupid kid."

With a bitter laugh, Voldemort said, "And the Potter boy is the same way. But Dumbledore will have advised them both that we are likely to manipulate this fact. Indeed, we have both already done so." He chuckled. "Harry has learned from me that that saving people doesn't always work out."

He laughed aloud, as did Ganon, who said, "There are some things..."

But his voice was fading out, as were the images, to be replaced by darkness and Ginny's panicked voice as she shook Harry by the shoulders.

"Harry! *Harry!* Harry, answer me!"

Realizing his eyes were closed, he opened them, and the light of the clear blue sky overhead caused a wave of pain to sear through his head. As he squinted them closed again and tried not to feel so nauseous, he heard Ginny continue to speak, her voice cracking with relief.

"Oh, thank God you're okay! What *happened*, Harry? Was it your scar?"

Risking opening his eyes again, he accepted Ginny's help in sitting up and muttered, "No. It wasn't."

"Really? That's weird."

Harry mumbled something in the affirmative.

"What was it, then?"

"I dunno..." Now that he thought about it, it was very strange. Besides having none of the usual symptoms connected to his scar, besides knocking him unconscious in the middle of the day instead of slipping into his mind when he was already asleep, it had been in the third person, not from Voldemort or even Ganondorf's point of view, and it had been blurry and unclear, as if he himself were struggling to hold onto consciousness as he watched it...which was ridiculous, because he had been completely unconscious. "I just...I saw Voldemort. And Ganon."

Ginny gave a quiet gasp. "Did...did they hurt someone?" she asked, in a terrified whisper. Harry could see the dark fear in her eyes, the memory of the attack on her father about a year before.

"No," he assured her. "They were talking. Planning something. I'm not sure exactly... I have to talk to Dumbledore," he blurted when it occurred to him. "And Link and Zelda! I have to tell them..."

His strength came to him with his resolve, and he clambered to his feet.

"Are you sure, you're okay?" Ginny asked, still looking worried. He couldn't blame her, but the fact was that he had returned to normal at a remarkable pace, and now had much more important things to worry about than whether or not he was going to collapse.

"Yes, I'm fine," he said shortly. "Dumbledore... Ginny, can you bring my Firebolt back up to Gryffindor Tower and everything?"

"Yeah, sure—"

"And if Link and Zelda are there, can you send them up to Dumbledore's office?"

"Yes—"

"Thanks."

Without waiting further, he sprinted off to the castle. He was barely aware of the halls, doors, people that flew past him as his feet traced the familiar path to the gargoyle, and the word "Chocolate" flew out of his mouth automatically. He didn't slow down, running up the moving staircase, and barely remembered to knock before charging into the Headmaster's office.

"Come in."

"Professor Dumbledore!" Harry shouted, looking around wildly. It took him a moment to spot the object of his search descending from the balcony that circled the top of his office behind his desk.

"Harry, is something wrong?" he asked, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"Professor, something just happened to me...I don't know, it wasn't really like my dreams or anything...it just came over me..."

"Lord Voldemort?"

"Yes, him and Ganon! I saw them, plotting something. Ganon told Voldemort that Link and Zelda are back!"

"And?" asked Dumbledore sharply.

"And...that's all I saw. But now we *have* to do something, don't we? Aren't we ready?"

"In a way, we are," Dumbledore said slowly. "We have enough members of the Order amassed that we could go into battle. However..."

"However?" Harry asked sharply. "What, however? What don't we have?"

"We have encountered a problem in locating their headquarters. Obviously Lord Voldemort has taken as many precautions with his own as we have with ours in London. Anti-Muggle Charms, of course, and it's Unplottable, to name some of the more basic ones. There is one much more complex spell which he has used, called the Ilmeura Charm, in conjunction with the Fidelius Charm, which ensures that no one can find the headquarters unless they already know where it is. In other words, anyone seeking his location must first be *told* where it is by Lord Voldemort himself, the Secret Keeper, and then personally *shown* where it is by someone who has already been there. If either one of these requirements is not fulfilled, the place will be invisible to us."

"Don't we have spies within the Death Eaters?" Harry asked carefully. He had, over the course of a few years, become convinced that Snape was working within Voldemort's organization to deliver information to the Order.

"We do," Dumbledore said, "but they can only meet the requirements of the Ilmeura Charm. We still must find a way for Lord Voldemort to violate his oath as Secret Keeper."

Harry racked his brain. He had seen the place in his dreams, he knew where it was, but...those dreams weren't real, they were just insights into Lord Voldemort's mind...

That was the answer! "Professor Dumbledore," he said, crossing the room to his usual chair and thinking hard as he spoke, "when I have my dreams, or when I used to, that was me getting into Voldemort's head, right? So if I saw his headquarters in my dreams, wouldn't that be the same as having him tell me where it is?"

Dumbledore frowned slightly, but Harry could see that he was thinking. "Have you ever had a dream in which you saw the specific location? Enough of the surrounding area that the place could be possible to identify?"

Tearing through memories, Harry blurted, "Yes! One dream, I flew into the window on an owl, I saw the whole neighbourhood! It's this big old mansion, just outside this little town..."

He let his voice fade out, realizing that this information was still all but useless. How could a vague mental image help the Order of the Phoenix hunt down Voldemort's base of operation? And even if it did, they wouldn't be able to see it once they got there, because Voldemort had only betrayed the secret to Harry.

But Dumbledore didn't seem discouraged. He was looking intensely at Harry, as though trying to see through his face into his mind. Then he abruptly stood up and walked over to one of his larger cupboards; Harry realized what he had gone to retrieve as soon as he held it out.

The basin of stone that Dumbledore placed down on his desk swirled with a silvery, liquidy substance that still boggled Harry's mind to describe, though he knew very well what it was.

"The process is simple," Dumbledore said. "Simply think about the scene which showed you this place, and when you have the image clearly enough that thinking about it any harder would cause you to lose the picture, touch your wand to your temple and draw it back slowly. You will feel yourself lose it, which may be bothersome, but I assure you it's normal. When the memory is completely detached, simply deposit it into the Pensieve. Do you have any questions?"

Harry shook his head.

"Whenever you're ready, then."

Harry closed his eyes and focused, trying to slip back into the dream.

Flying on the back of an eagle owl, over a small hamlet, towards a crumbling, decrepit manor covered in ivy, with a few broken windows, unkempt gardens...

Inside one of the rooms, a fire burned in the grate. It seemed there was always a fire in every dream Harry had ever had, and it was always the only source of life and light in the otherwise dim room. On the floor before the hearth was an old, rich rug, and curled upon this

was a snake of such size that Harry would have been terrified to meet it in real life, if not for the fact that he had already faced so much worse. Facing the fire was a large, soft armchair, damaged by age and neglect, like everything in this house, but once of good quality. The rest of the room was less certain in Harry's mind. He knew there was a mirror on one wall, age spotted and dirty, and a door which opened in to face the back of the chair. Reds and browns were the dominant colours of the space, and the fire cast distorted and frightening dancing shadows over everything.

The snake was prowling, and the trembling, snivelling figure of Wormtail was curled helplessly on the floor in front of the chair. Voldemort, in his weak, all but useless body, was sitting in that chair, and he was going to torture his servant. Harry could see it all quite clearly now...

He touched his wand to his temple and drew it away, feeling something tugging as though he was sliding a hair out of the middle of his mind; at the same time, the image of the house was fading. He could remember it, but he couldn't picture it.

Strangely relieved, Harry deposited the thread of his thoughts into the Pensieve, which began to swirl, but soon settled.

"Thank you, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I will return momentarily."

With that, he prodded the calm silver with his wand, and Harry saw the village appear as it swirled rapidly. Dumbledore looked into it, and without hesitation leaned down so that his face touched the water. He was instantaneously pulled into the Pensieve, leaving Harry alone.

Dumbledore's office was never completely silent. Several of the witches and wizards whose portraits hung on the walls breathed evenly as they slept, some unknown instruments hummed and whirred, and Fawkes the phoenix let out quiet, peaceful calls from his perch. Harry smiled at him; that phoenix had helped him out almost as much as Dumbledore himself.

"If it isn't Harry Potter."

Harry recognized the voice, the very slow but very cultured and slightly less bitter and sarcastic than usual voice, of Phineas Nigellus; the former Headmaster was also Sirius' great-great-grandfather, though by far not as friendly.

"If it isn't Phineas Nigellus," Harry answered symmetrically.

"How has life been treating you, Potter?" asked Phineas, reclining in the chair on which he had been painted.

"Life hasn't treated me well since...the Hallowe'en when I was one year old."

Phineas raised his eyebrows. "I have never yet met a teenager who could pinpoint the date on which their angst was founded."

Smiling wryly, Harry said, "Well, you've never met a teenager like me."

After a giving a short laugh, Phineas regarded Harry considerately. "You know," he said after a pause, "you must be a remarkable young man. I've heard of all your accomplishments from my little spot on this wall, and those I haven't have come my way through the other portrait, at Grimmauld Place."

Harry felt something in his stomach clench. *Oh, please don't mention Sirius, please...*

"Dumbledore holds you in very high esteem," Phineas went on thoughtfully. "Yes... And your godfather..."

No, please...

"As much as I never understood him, frankly, I could tell that you meant the world to him. He couldn't have loved his own son more."

Harry looked away from the portrait, staring straight ahead of him. He couldn't think of what to say. Phineas fell silent for a moment, but soon began to speak again.

"And you—"

"I loved him, too," Harry said shortly. "So don't ask."

"I wasn't going to," Phineas said delicately. "I was going to comment that you were his heir... Did you know?"

"I found out at Christmas," Harry answered dully.

"Ah," Phineas said, nodding. "So do you think you'll be wanting the house, then?"

Harry frowned. "What? You mean at Grimmauld Place?"

"Where else?"

"But...he just left me his money, not his property..."

Phineas raised his eyebrows. "That's not exactly true. He simply hasn't given you his property yet. The old Black house is currently in the possession of Albus Dumbledore, but after your graduation you will be allowed to take it, if you choose. Apparently he promised you something about living with him, and this is as close as he'll come to fulfilling that promise. He is a man of his word, even now, despite all the screaming his mother does about his being a blood traitor."

Snorting, Harry was about to say exactly how much her opinion was worth, but he was interrupted when the door to the office burst open; he jumped in his chair and whipped around, but it was only Link and Zelda.

"Sorry we're late," Link explained, as he and Zelda hurried into the room, looking stressed. "One of the staircases decided we should take a detour... Where's Dumbledore?"

"In there," said Harry nodding towards the Pensieve. "He'll be back in a minute."

Link looked as if he would have liked to ask more questions, but Zelda was already speaking, "Ginny told us what happened to you, Harry. I've had those types of visions before, I used to get them all the time when Link was fighting to awaken the Sages, I used to see what he was doing." Though Link did a double take at what was

apparently news to him, Zelda didn't seem to notice or care. "Never had them before or since. They happen when the goddesses want to tell you something important," she went on. "What was it telling you? What did you see?"

"Ganon told Voldemort that you're back," Harry explained simply. "So now we're getting ready to launch an attack. Dumbledore just went to find out where the Death Eaters headquarters are."

"What is that thing?" Link asked, approaching the Pensieve and frowning at it.

Harry explained briefly how it worked, including how it would help fight the Ilmeura and Fidelius Charms. "And I guess Dumbledore's idea is that getting into my memories of Voldemort's thoughts would be the same as getting straight into Voldemort's thoughts," he concluded with a shrug.

"Well, then, we need to get in there, too," said Zelda. "All of us who are going to be a part of the attack, we all need to go into that memory first."

"Yeah, you're right," Link agreed, unconcerned. "So how do we get in there? Just dive in?"

"Ye—Well, I don't know if you should," said Harry, slightly startled by how completely willing Link was to fling himself into the unknown. But then, he'd definitely faced worse.

"He's right, we should wait for Dumbledore," Zelda agreed.

Link shrugged, apparently willing to take this course of action as well, though he clearly would have preferred to scope out the territory of their opponents.

Unexpectedly, Dumbledore burst out of the Pensieve, flipping head over heels quickly and landing on his feet.

"Do you know where it is, sir?" Harry asked eagerly.

"I do," Dumbledore answered briskly. He was already seated behind his desk and pulling out parchment, quills and some small and complicated-looking instruments. "Thank you very much, Harry."

"Well—What are we going to do?" asked Harry, bewildered by how fast Dumbledore was suddenly working.

"I'm making arrangements," the Headmaster said. "We need to assemble the Order for battle... Link, Zelda, you'll need to visit Harry's memories as well."

"Now?" asked Link.

"Certainly," Dumbledore agreed, nodding towards the Pensieve. "Go right ahead. Simply touch the liquid, and you'll be transported."

Link didn't hesitate to plunge his arms into the bowl, and he was sucked away. Zelda was right behind him.

"What do I do, Professor?" Harry asked.

Looking up at him closely, Dumbledore considered a moment before answering. "For now, you must just behave normally. No one must know what we're planning."

"Not...not even Ron and Hermione?" Harry blurted in alarm. "And what about Ginny? She saw the vision happen, what am I supposed to tell her?"

"You can tell them the truth of the vision, but it is imperative that they not know our plan."

"But we can trust them!" Harry insisted angrily.

"I know we can," Dumbledore agreed. "However, it is never wise to give strategic information to those who are not directly concerned with it."

There was no way Harry could argue with this. Whatever he said, Dumbledore was right about that point, and he also had years of experience to back up his opinion. Albeit with dissatisfaction, Harry

swallowed the stream of counterarguments he wanted to launch and simply nodded mutely.

"Thank you. I'm sorry to have to ask you to conceal information from your friends, but..." He paused to sigh. "Sometimes there is no other way."

Peter Pettigrew, Harry suddenly thought, as though his mind had tossed him this example to shatter any doubts he might have had that Dumbledore was right. As sure as Harry was that Ron, Hermione and Ginny would never betray him—and he was completely sure—he couldn't help remembering that the whole world could have been better if no one had decided to trust crucial information to someone who didn't need it.

Yet he remembered as well the trip to the Department of Mysteries the year before; they had supported him in a chore he couldn't have done alone, but they had also suffered the consequences, as Tonks had vividly reminded them all in that first Defence Against the Dark Arts class. The images of his friends faces—Ron's skin lacerated and scarred deeply from an assault of thoughts that weren't his own—Ginny's face so twisted in pain from her broken ankle that she couldn't find words to speak—Luna unconscious where Death Eaters had brutally knocked her across the room—Neville screaming as the people who had tortured his parents gave him the same treatment—and the horrifying second when he had watched Hermione fall, bright terror in her wide eyes, and believed her dead. And it was this, more than anything else, that convinced him that it was not worth bringing them into this battle. He would fight with the Triforce—for them, not beside them.

Chapter Fourteen—Commander Hero

Of course, as soon as Harry returned to the common room, he was faced with a barrage of questions from his terrified friends. Ginny had had the sense to tell only Ron and Hermione what had happened, but the three of them were very clearly struggling not to explode with the stress of not knowing what Dumbledore had said. They pulled him to the couch by the fireplace and swarmed him, demanding answers. In a low voice, he told them more or less what his vision had consisted of, though he didn't tell them what Zelda had explained to him, and concluded with the story he had invented on his way back to Gryffindor Tower.

"It was nothing. I told Dumbledore about it, and he said that because it was so different from all my other dreams, he doesn't think it really matters. And because I didn't get into anybody's head, it wasn't dangerous that way."

"But that doesn't make sense!" Hermione protested in a low hiss. "Something like that... It can't just mean *nothing*!"

"There's no way it wasn't important, Harry," Ginny agreed firmly. "I saw what happened, and that was definitely something major. Besides, what's taking Link and Zelda so long to come back?"

They were still in the Headmaster's office, discussing tactics, Harry presumed. "I don't know," he said, semi-truthfully. "Seems like they always have big stuff to talk about that they don't fill me in on."

His friends could accept this without question, but they weren't buying his first excuse. "What's going on, mate?" Ron asked bluntly. "You're not saying something."

Harry shrugged and gave an irritated sigh. "Okay, look, maybe it *was* something, but Dumbledore's not telling me. Maybe he doesn't know what it is, either, and he doesn't want to just make a mad guess. Maybe... I don't know, maybe he just doesn't think I'm old enough to handle the truth yet—"

"Heaven knows he should be past that," Hermione muttered.

"I know," Harry agreed. "Bottom line is, if it means anything, he didn't tell me, and that's all there is to it."

Knowing there would be further objections, he waited, looking around at them all and wondering who would be the first to speak.

"Fine," Hermione sighed, though she looked distinctly irked by this lack of information.

Ron shrugged and said, "Well...whatever, I guess."

Ginny simply gave Harry a particularly angry scowl, before heading off to her dormitory.

"What's up with her?" Ron asked, furrowing his brow in bemusement.

Harry was about to say that he didn't have a clue, because that was at least the complete truth, when his stomach growled and he remembered that he still hadn't had any lunch yet. "Dunno...but I'm starving," he said. "Is lunch still going on?"

"It just finished."

"Oh. I guess I'm breaking into the kitchens, then," Harry decided nonchalantly, rising from his chair.

"Harry Potter, sir!"

Unsurprisingly, Dobby was one of the first in the Hogwarts kitchens to meet Harry. He came zipping past his fellow house-elves to embrace Harry tightly around the middle, only prevented from winding him completely because Harry was prepared for it based on previous experience.

"Hey, Dobby," he said, managing to pry the small creature off of him. "Good to see you."

"And Dobby is very happy to see *you*, sir!" Dobby squeaked, clasping his hands. "The other elves has been telling Dobby that you is forgetting me, sir, but I is telling them right back, 'Harry Potter is noble and loyal, and he is never forgetting his friends!'"

Which caused a pang of guilt to surge through Harry's stomach.

"Oh...yeah, of course not."

"What can Dobby help you with, sir?" the house-elf added, bowing with a bright smile.

"Actually, I missed lunch. Training for Quidditch and stuff. Are there any leftovers?"

"Oh, yes, Harry Potter, sir! We has not started cleaning up the dishes yet! Lunch is still over there! You can eat whatever you likes, sir!"

He pointed across the massive kitchen to the table that corresponded to the Gryffindor one in the Great Hall above it. The many dishes of lunch, half eaten, but still just as good, were sitting there.

"Thanks, Dobby," Harry said, starting to head for the table.

"You is very welcome, sir!"

On impulse, though he couldn't have said why, he turned back and called, "Hey, Dobby... Could you do me a favour?"

Far from being inconvenienced, the house-elf looked ecstatic at the prospect. "Oh, yes, Harry Potter, sir, yes, whatever you is needing!"

"Is there a parchment and a quill around here somewhere? I need to write something."

With a hurried bow, Dobby rushed away, and returned momentarily, having procured the required items.

"Thanks," Harry said, taking them and trying to think of a way to word what he needed without terrifying the loyal house-elf. "Listen, Dobby...I'm going to write something, and I need you to...I mean..."

He paused, then tried again.

"I'm going to write something, and I'm going to give it to you. And if you...if in the next few weeks, you hear some bad news about me..." Seeing Dobby's eyes widen in fear, he hurriedly amended, "I'm not

saying there *will* be bad news, because I don't think there will, but just in case...unless I come back and tell you otherwise before then, if you hear some really bad news about me...could you give this to my friends?"

Dobby was still stiff with apparent fear, his hands clutched together anxiously, but he merely squeaked, "Yes. Yes, Harry Potter, sir, Dobby will."

"Thanks," Harry said again, but with a heavier note in his voice this time.

Grabbing a leg of chicken, Harry sighed and turned his attention to the blank parchment before him.

This was harder to begin than any letter to Remus and Sirius. He just hoped that it would never see the light of day.

By the time he had finished lunch, Harry had written everything he thought he wanted to, and reread it before handing it off to Dobby.

Ron, Hermione, Ginny,

If you're reading this, it's because I can't give it to you in person. You'll have heard the rest of the story, and while I'm writing this, it hasn't happened yet, so I'll just say that I'm sorry I didn't tell you before that I was going to fight. I didn't want to drag you all into this. It's between those of us with the duty to the Triforce.

First of all, and most importantly, I don't want you to worry about me, no matter you've heard, no matter what's happened. Everything that we've been through, and Link and Zelda, too, proves that there is such a thing as destiny, and the goddesses don't allow anything to happen if it's not supposed to. I'm sure everything will work out for the best, even if it doesn't seem that way now.

Second, I want you all to know how much I appreciate that you've always been there for me since I first met you, and the fact that I didn't bring you into this with me doesn't mean that I don't care about you. Like I said before, I didn't want to put this on your shoulders. You weren't born into this, no prophecy said you were going to grow up to

fight evil, no sword chose to you wield it against evil, no scar marked you. All those things happened to me and only me.

I know what you're thinking: We didn't hear what that prophecy said at the end of last year, we don't know what was supposed to happen. But I did hear it. Dumbledore told me about it. It said that I was the only one who could defeat the Dark Lord, and that one of us would have to kill the other in the end.

This was my fight. It always has been. I'm just sorry you had to find out this way.

He paused for a long time over the signature, feeling strangely hollow, as though he were dreaming. He tried to blink this feeling away, but it remained, just as the horrible dryness in his throat did no matter how hard he swallowed.

From...Sincerely...Yours truly...Best wishes...

Love,

Harry

He folded the letter, sincerely hoping, again, as he had done with each sentence he wrote, that no one would ever have to read this letter...because in the event that they did...it would be far too detached and aloof to come near whatever they would be feeling, and grossly inadequate to say whatever he really meant.

Every day was now obviously building towards battle—at least, to Harry, it was obvious. No one else seemed to find anything particularly unusual about how Link was putting him through his paces in combat (as well as honing his own skills) with a drive that was dramatically unlike his usual upbeat self, or how Zelda spent most of her time lost in thought and muttering to herself as tiny shocks of magic crackled and sparked from her fingers. The teachers, though, must have been aware of what was going on, because none of them seemed to care that Harry's grades were slipping as he devoted more time to swordplay and archery.

One day, after a hard evening's training, as Harry panted for breath and wiped the sweat from his brow, Link looked him over appraisingly and said decided, "You're good, Harry. Now that you've gotten used to the feel of a weapon in your hand, you're showing a definite talent." He folded his arms and nodded thoughtfully; the fact that he wasn't smirking or inserting any of his usual sharp wit unnerved Harry slightly. He didn't quite know how to act around this version of the man. "When I die, I'll be satisfied to know that you're holding the Master Sword."

Harry didn't answer, but it wasn't just because he was out of breath or unsure what to say. Link must have noticed, because a small crease appeared in his brow.

"What's up, Harry?"

Some of his habitual friendliness had returned to his voice. This made it much easier for Harry to find words to explain what he was thinking.

"Link... How are you going to die?" he asked carefully, leaning against the sword that he had driven into the grass. "You're a soul, souls are immortal. So aren't you just...a ghost?" He knew this couldn't be right, since neither of the Hylians looked or acted like a ghost, but he didn't really understand how it wasn't true.

Sighing, Link slumped out of his military posture and dropped his arms to his sides. "I was wondering when this was going to come up," he commented, half talking to himself. More clearly, he explained, "I'm a soul and not a ghost because I preserved myself while I was still alive. People become ghosts when they arrange for the souls of their dead bodies not to leave this world, but the brief time between when they die and when the spell takes effect reduces the soul to something less...a ghost. My soul was taken from my living body, so it is complete.

"As for how I'm going to die, well, complete souls are too divine to exist unconditionally here." He smirked. "We're just too good for this world, kid. So Zelda and I have been preserved under the stipulation that we can remain in this realm only so long as Ganondorf lives. When we kill him, all three of our souls will go on to the Sacred Realm. And all three pieces of the Triforce will be passed on."

Harry remained silent, staring at the sunlight that glinted off the blade of his weapon as he considered all this.

"You've got more questions, don't you?" Link asked quietly, barely breaking the silence between them.

Wondering vaguely if everyone found him this easy to read, Harry said, "Yeah...well...I was just wondering how it is you got into the Sacred Realm when you were alive? You told me something about Zelda and the Sages protecting you, but..." He let his voice trail off, the silence asking the question for him.

"Let me describe it for you," Link began, standing up straighter again. "I'm standing inside the Temple of Time. It's this stone building, all white, stained glass windows, vaulted ceiling, the whole thing. At the far end is a stone platform thing where the three Spiritual Stones go, and a couple of stairs on either side that lead up to the Door of Time... which, incidentally, is really more of a wall than a door, but that's not the point. So I play the Song of Time, and the Door of Time just disappears, so it's this huge empty archway..."

Harry didn't quite notice that the hairs on the back of his neck had started to stand up.

"...and I climb the stairs up to it and walked through it, and there's the Master Sword on the other side. I pull it up out of the Pedestal of Time, and *woosh*, suddenly I'm time traveling. Next thing I know, I'm seventeen, and the world's been shot to hell by Ganon." He gave a short, bitter laugh. "That's what I saw, anyway. The technicalities of it are that I opened a temporal hole by taking the sword, a gateway between this world and the Sacred Realm. And as long as the Master Sword is in use, as long as the Triforce is still divided and not back where it belongs, that hole has remained open."

Funny, Harry thought, how clearly he could picture the scene, even though he had never seen it before. No, that wasn't quite true, because he had dreamed about it on the night they had resurrected the Hylians... Except—a chill ran up his spine—it had been different...

"That's what Sirius fell through," he breathed in hollow disbelief, his mouth very dry, staring straight ahead as the image reappeared in his mind's eye. "That...that hole you opened, the archway on the dais in that huge room...in the Department of Mysteries...they research time there, time travel... And it was hung with a curtain, and....he fell through...and he didn't come back..."

When Link didn't answer, Harry looked up and saw that he wore an expression of utter shock on his face, which had gone white, his eyes wide and his mouth slightly open. Managing, with visible difficulty, to find words, he stammered, "I... Harry, I don't know what to—"

"Don't worry about it," Harry told him shortly, blinking and looking down. "It's not your fault. I mean, you didn't do it on purpose or anything."

"No, but still... I just hate to think that anything I did—"

"You didn't know," Harry insisted. "You can never predict what one little thing is gonna do, especially not nine thousand years later. I've done time travel, I know. And so have you, so you should've learned that by now, too," he added.

"Yeah," Link agreed, running his fingers agitatedly through his hair, "I know. Kinda hard not to. But I've just always hated that I can't control everything. I hate that my whole life was planned out for me... I mean, for Din's sake, it was written in our holy text, everything I would do!" he burst out unexpectedly, talking more to himself than to Harry. "And destiny just got to do whatever it wanted with my life, without giving a damn if maybe that would make things difficult for me, or if maybe I would rather have had a mother than become a hero... I just..." He made a frustrated gesture in mid-air, as though he wished he could grip something to take out his anger on it, before finishing bleakly, "I hate that."

Professor Trelawney's voice, as it had issued from her misty form floating in Dumbledore's Pensieve, suddenly drifted into Harry's mind, harsh and forceful: *The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...*

"Yeah," he said heavily. "I know what you mean."

That Saturday was to be the day.

Zelda and Link told Harry so covertly on Thursday morning; apparently the Pensieve had made its way to Grimmauld Place, where all those people who would be coming with them into battle had visited Harry's memory. First thing when the weekend began, before the sun had risen, they would leave Hogwarts for London, and by late morning they would be launching an attack.

They explained this perfectly calmly, as if it were the sort of thing they did every day, in a rare moment during which Harry could actually appreciate that they had once been powerful world leaders.

"Oh," he replied stupidly. "Okay, then."

Now it was Friday night, and the atmosphere was strange. Harry was trying to act normally, because no one was to know what was going on, and the Hylans were doing the same, but he rather thought they would have been chatting normally anyway. They did retire to bed at an unusually early hour for beings who didn't need sleep, but no one seemed to notice or care.

"Something wrong, Harry?" Hermione asked, as he stared at the empty stairwell which Link had just ascended to his dorm.

"Huh?" he blinked his attention onto her. "Oh...no. Just thinking."

"About what?" Ron asked.

A true answer to this question would have taken several hours to give. He was thinking about how unreal it seemed to be sitting here in the Gryffindor common room, an hour or two after dinner, calmly talking with his friends before the fireplace, putting off homework as always on a Friday night, knowing full well that he was going to war in the morning. About how disturbing it was to think that no one but him knew—Ron and Hermione didn't distinguish this day from any other as they sat together on the couch, his arm around her, smiling and looking at Harry just as they had always done, not knowing that they would wake up in the morning to find him gone...

The word *gone* made his stomach grow heavy, sinking so low in his body that it dissolved. He refused to allow himself to think about it, but it continued to echo against his will in the back of his mind. *Gone*.

Just for a while, he told himself sternly. I'll be back in classes again when the weekend's over. I'll be away one day, maybe two, but probably not. Just until the battle's over. Just until Link and Zelda defeat Ganon, and then...

Abruptly, he realized that after this battle, they would be really gone. He had become so accustomed to their presence that he had forgotten they hadn't always been here. Of course they sometimes showed their ignorance of the wizarding world, but didn't Harry himself do the same thing on occasion? They were as much a part of life at Hogwarts as trips to Hogsmeade on weekends, or insults exchanged with Draco Malfoy when teachers weren't looking, or Peeves lurking around a corner to wreak havoc, or Professor Binns' droning voice putting a class to sleep, or the giant squid waving its tentacles above the water on lazy summer days, or...anything else.

The library would seem empty without Zelda taking up an entire table with books on every subject from Apparition techniques to Zulu wizarding government (which she would later tell them about over dinner). Quidditch would seem boring without Link fulfilling his promise to be the most unbelievably vociferous supporter cheering from the stands (which he had taken to doing even when Gryffindor wasn't playing). And the common room would seem quiet without the queen yelling at the knight about the latest irritating thing he had done.

He would really miss them.

Realizing that Ron was still waiting for an answer, Harry said simply, "Just...classes next week."

Lying awake in bed that night, Harry found himself wishing he'd said something more profound to his friends before he'd headed up off sleep than "Night." But what else was there? After all, it wasn't like he was never going to see them again.

Besides, Link and Zelda *weren't* going to see them again, and they hadn't said anything special... In fact, this struck him as quite sad now that he thought of it. They hadn't gotten to say goodbye...

All in all, it was amazing that he managed to drift off as quickly as he did, into an utterly dreamless sleep.

Early in the morning, before sunrise, Harry awoke and dressed silently. Dumbledore had told him that, while he couldn't tell anyone explicitly that he was leaving or where he was going, he could leave them a note telling them not to worry. He quickly composed one to leave on his bed.

Ron,

I can't tell you where I am, but I can tell you that I'm safe, and I'll be back soon, hopefully tonight. I'm really sorry this has to be a secret, and I know how horrible it is to be left in the dark, but I don't have a choice.

Tell Hermione and everyone for me.

See you really soon.

Harry

He felt he should have emphasized more how sorry he was to be leaving like this, but he somehow didn't really feel like he was going anywhere yet, even as he lay this small bit of parchment on his blankets and tiptoed out of the dorm.

Down in the common room, he found Link and Zelda waiting for him. They nodded in greeting at the sight of him, but said nothing, and beckoned him silently after them and out of Gryffindor Tower. Once in the halls, Zelda spoke quietly.

"We're going to number twelve, Grimmauld Place for breakfast and to get ready," she said. "Dumbledore told us you know the place?"

"Yeah, I do," Harry replied simply, choosing not to get into the details of his relationship with it. "Did he say how we're getting there?"

"No."

They said nothing more until they arrived at the Entrance Hall, where they found Dumbledore waiting for them, along with Tonks. Her appearance was comparatively bland today, as she appeared as a young woman with freckles, grey eyes and a short, dirty blonde ponytail. Winking and smiling, though with slightly diminished enthusiasm that was tempered by the seriousness of the occasion, she greeted them, "Woher. Are we all here, then?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore; he was speaking quietly, but his voice still commanded respect. Holding up a mug that he held in one hand, he explained to the Hylians, "This is a Portkey. You simply have to touch it, while I count to three, and it will take us to our headquarters."

He held it out, and Harry and Tonks reached out to touch it without hesitation, both being quite accustomed with the process. Link and Zelda exchanged mildly intrigued looks, but didn't hesitate to lay their own hands on the Portkey as well.

"Ready," said Dumbledore. "One...two...*three*."

The feeling of being jerked from behind the navel was familiar to Harry, but he heard on his right a sharp intake of breath from Link and a small, quickly stifled gasp from Zelda when it happened. He wondered, during the brief period when they were all swirling in colours, how this could be strange to them when they were used to teleporting, as he had seen in the Forbidden Forest; of course, that had been slightly tamer.

When they landed solidly, he turned his attention quickly to attempting to remain on his feet. He stumbled, but remained standing, and saw Zelda trip over the hem of her skirt and fall into Link. He wasn't expecting it, and she nearly brought him down with her, but he managed to catch her at the last second. Pulling herself back upright and brushing the windswept hair from her face, she growled, "Damn dress."

Harry couldn't help smirking; there was definitely something less than dainty about this perfect lady.

"You're changing for the battle, aren't you?" Link asked.

With a faint smile, Zelda replied shrewdly, "Sheik wouldn't miss this for the world."

She raised her arms to transform herself, but before she could, two people entered the room to greet the visitors, looking as though their arrival was completely anticipated.

The first was a fairly tall young man whom Harry knew to be about twenty years old. He was dressed in immaculately neat robes of deep navy blue, wore rimless glasses, and had distinct Weasley hair. The sight of him was a pleasant surprise, because the previous year, Percy Weasley had been estranged from his family. It was good to see that he had rescinded his coldness, even if he did look awkward facing Harry for the first time since deciding to believe him.

The second man was older, in his thirties, but aged beyond his years. His light hair was already streaked with grey, and although he was no longer as thin with hunger as he had once been, his face remained lined and tired looking. He appeared to be as neat as could be expected, given that his robes were fairly shabby and layered against the winter cold. Despite it all, he wore a welcoming smile, which Harry was sure was a valiant effort to hide the deadened look of grief that haunted his eyes.

"Hi, Remus," Harry greeted him with a smile. It was the first time they had seen each other in person since a group of Order members had turned up at King's Cross at the beginning of the previous summer in order to threaten the Dursleys on Harry's behalf.

"Nice to see you, Harry. I got your last letter. Congratulations."

"Wha—? Oh," Harry laughed, remembering the Hufflepuff Quidditch game that had consumed his most recent correspondence. "Thanks."

"Hello, Harry," said Percy, apparently compensating for his antecedent unjust behaviour through added formality. "And Professor Dumbledore...good to see you again." He gave a slight bow of his head.

Smiling, Dumbledore replied, "Not half so good as it is to see you again, Mr Weasley."

This must have been their first reencounter as well, Harry thought. Apparently not knowing what to say, Percy simply cleared his throat with a cough.

"May I introduce our guests and allies," Dumbledore went on, indicating the Hylians. "This is Queen Zelda Hyrule I, and Sir Link Hero. Link, Zelda, these are Remus Lupin and Percy Weasley, two of our members."

Hellos and pleased-to-meet-yous were exchanged all around, then Remus said seriously, "Everyone's gathered in the kitchen, Dumbledore."

"Excellent."

They all went downstairs together into the basement kitchen, where more members of the Order of the Phoenix were gathered. Link and Zelda met, among others, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Emmeline Vance, Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, Dedalus Diggle, Elphias Dodge, Hestia Jones, and several more Weasleys: Molly, Arthur, Bill, Charlie, and—to Harry's surprise—Fred and George.

"Yeah, we've joined," said George, spotting Harry's unconcealed disbelief.

"We've been of age for over a year, and we want to do our bit," Fred added.

"Not that we're going on this little adventure," George amended.

"We're leaving the combat up to the trained pros," agreed Fred with a grin, nodding toward Link and Zelda.

But Harry knew there was another reason, which they weren't mentioning: because their mother would chain them to a wall if they tried to put themselves in harm's way. It occurred to him, as he was thinking this, that Charlie was a new arrival, too. He had been stationed in Romania the previous year, where he was doing

something about spreading the word of Voldemort and keeping an eye out for international activities of his recruiting Death Eaters. Harry supposed that this was less important now that the government and public at large had acknowledged Voldemort's return to strength.

"So," Link said briskly, clapping his hands together, "what have we got in the way of an attack plan? I know that with a group this small we can't go for the more traditional offences of an entire army, but this isn't a traditional battle. We just have to get in, find Ganon and Voldemort. Then it's really a four on two conflict, or a pair of two on one conflicts. First issue is breaching security."

His question had turned into an answer; while the Order had devised a plan, Link took over in a matter of seconds. It was obvious, even to those who had only just met him, that he was used to being the leader of an attack; he saw the most obscure flaws in a plan, knew what the enemy would be thinking, and thought of a responsive strategy for every possible scenario. For example, he recommended they use code names, since they were going into battle with enemies who knew them by their real names. Each person had a strictly dictated role, and he organized within minutes a system of commands to change these roles if the need arose. He addressed all questions swiftly, explained himself thoroughly, and was concise and clear enough that even those people who had never seen combat before knew what they would be doing.

After two and a half hours, during which they ate the delicious breakfast provided by Mrs Weasley, there was no doubt in Harry's mind that they quite simply could not have been more prepared. He also found, as he ate, that he wasn't nervous, but rather felt oddly detached from his own body. He looked down at his hands, and they looked more three dimensional than usual. Being in a battle was not a new experience for him, but being in one this organized, or even one that he knew was coming...that was uncharted territory.

Undoubtedly, however, the strangest moment was when he took off his robe and, standing there in the Muggle clothes of a typical teenage boy, slung onto his back a quiver of arrows and a bow. His wand was tucked into his pocket; that at least felt natural.

Everyone was getting ready in silence. They were all dressed in unrestrictive Muggle clothes, like Harry, with a few exceptions. Dumbledore never changed out of his robes, Link always went into battle in his green tunic and hat, and Zelda would be changing into Sheik momentarily. Presently, she held one of Link's arrows (he was the only one besides Harry who carried weapons other than a wand; the Master Sword, along with his own bow) and was waving her hand around its head in what was apparently an enchantment. When she had finished, the arrow glowed with a bright yellow light that didn't fade. Harry remembered Link's words when they had first started training his archery—"The Master Sword's just half of the battle. The more famous half, but still just half. You also need the Light Arrows."

As Zelda handed Link back his shaft and he slid it into his quiver, she said to Harry, "Give me one of yours, too."

He complied, and she enchanted it in the same way, explaining, "Any of your arrows will have that power now, if you just think about it while you're firing." Harry nodded his comprehension, and then the queen prepared herself.

She performed the same technique she had done in Transfiguration class, invoking light with her hands and bringing it over her body in a blinding flash, which faded to present what looked like a young man dressed in blue and white. Harry couldn't help feeling slightly smug that he was one of the three people in the room who had seen this already, but even he found himself gaping when Sheik tested his weapons. With several quick flicks of the wrist, he conjured the shiv Zelda had used in her demonstration with Link, which he spun between his fingers; then he replaced it with a long, thin chain that he sent out like a whip; then he made this vanish and produced in the same hand a quick succession of five throwing stars. Perhaps the most amazing part of this presentation was the skillful indifference with which he lightly manipulated each of these items.

"All right, then," Link said, carefully examining the tip of his blade before sheathing it across his back; he and Dumbledore were the only ones present who weren't remotely impressed by Sheik's display of talent. "Roll call, by code names. Gold?"

"Yes," said Kingsley.

"Moony?"

"Here."

They proceeded through all the names, most of which were ones that made obvious sense to Harry as a reflection of the personality of the one they were assigned to.

"Phoenix?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore.

"Sheik?"

"Uh-huh."

"And... Prongs?"

Harry swallowed. "Uh-huh."

Clapping his hands again, Link said, "Well, we're all here, and we all know our names. We all know the plan?"

"Yes," they all answered clearly, as he had told them to. Harry found it odd to see Dumbledore taking orders from anyone, and also felt strangely compelled by Link's authoritative manner to add some sort of title.

"My name's Kokiri, if you need it," Link was now explaining, "or else just Commander. Ganon is Spirit, Voldemort is Tom. Right? Right. Now," he turned to Dumbledore, "you said you had our transportation arranged. Are we just gonna grab another one of those...Portkeys?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Twenty-four of us are too many to travel easily that way. We will be flying. I have arranged for Hagrid to bring up a herd of Thestrals."

Harry's first impulse at these words was to feel a pang of guilt; he hadn't seen or spoken to Hagrid in far too long, because his time had been occupied with school, Quidditch, and Link and Zelda. In fact, he

hadn't even seen the groundskeeper since well before Aragog's death. Did Hagrid even know about it yet?

Putting this out of his mind, because it was irrelevant to the task at hand, his uneasiness instead fell on the fact that he knew most of the people in this room would be able to see the Thestrals—in some cases, because of Sirius.

Apparently Dumbledore was thinking the same thing, and Harry could see him mentally scanning the crowd and determining who would be able to see their mounts. After a moment's pause, he said, "Hermes, Opal, Osiris, Dragon... Have any of you witnessed a death?"

Using their code names in some way made the scene feel like a childhood game, but the sober atmosphere smothered that analogy thoroughly.

Percy and Elphias shook their heads, and Bill said slowly, "No..."

Charlie, however, cleared his throat and said simply, "Yes." He did not elaborate. Harry, recalling that Charlie worked with dragons and was considered by Hagrid to be good with animals, thought that the eldest Weasley must have understood the significance of the question. Dumbledore merely nodded and made no further inquiries.

"In that case," he said, "you other three will be unable to see the horses we will be riding. The rest of us will help you. I believe Hagrid should be arriving in the backyard any minute now."

"All right, then," Link ordered. "Dispatch."

Chapter Fifteen—Heart of a Hero

Hagrid had not yet arrived in the backyard, though the sun was beginning to make an appearance, but within five minutes, Harry saw in the sky a flock of massive, black beings soaring at a remarkable speed.

"Here they are," Dumbledore stated as the beasts began their descent. Within moments, the huge, skeletal horses with their wide, staring eyes had landed lightly on the grass. Hagrid was sitting astride one.

"Here yeh are, Professor Dumbledore, sir," he said. "Yeh said yeh'd be needin' twenty-four, so I brough' yeh twenty-six, jus' ter be certain. Tha' be enough, then?"

"Yes, Hagrid, thank you," Dumbledore confirmed. "You can bring two back with you."

Nodding, Hagrid reached from the back of his own mount to grab the reins of a second; only then did Harry realize that the horses had all been saddled up for riders. This trip would be more comfortable than the previous time he had ridden off to battle on a Thestral...and hopefully it wouldn't end with the death of someone he cared about...

Harry looked instinctively over at Link, who was swinging comfortably into his saddle, and realized with a lurch that this journey was going to end that way. Link and Zelda were riding out, but on the way back, there would be two extra Thestrals, and Harry would be the one with the Master Sword across his back.

Inexplicably, he found himself desperately wishing that at this moment he could be anyone other than himself. He didn't think he could handle what was being expected of him. He had gone into battle before, yes, but that was something quite different from picking up Link's legacy and saving the world... It took all his willpower to climb onto his mount's back.

Then, for no apparent reason, he remembered the words he had written for his parents and Sirius. He had finally found the time to

write them down...and left them in his dormitory. His heart plunged horribly. His one chance, and he had ruined it.

"Stick by me, Prongs," came Link's voice. "Sheik and Phoenix, you two stick together, too!"

Grateful for an excuse to canter over to Link's side, Harry said quietly, "Hey, L—I mean...Commander. I need to talk to you."

Giving him a sharp look, Link muttered, "Right now?" To the party in general, he called, "Get into ranks when you're mounted."

"Well," mumbled Harry uncomfortably, "it's either now or in the middle of battle."

Link sighed. "True. Okay, what is it?"

Suddenly Harry felt as though his problem was trivial. But no, he brushed that concern aside; surely Link would understand.

"It's just... You remember you said you'd give a message to my parents and Sirius?"

Link's eyes widened, and he said quietly, "*Taniway*." (This, Harry knew, was a particularly impolite Hylian word; Zelda had been quite annoyed that Link dared teach it to Harry and Ron.) To the troops, he shouted, "Everyone, ready to fly?"

"Yes, Commander," came twenty-four voices as one.

"Advance!"

In unison, twenty-four Thestrals spread their wings and took to the sky. Harry heard Dumbledore's voice, surprisingly loud, yell, "The Riddle House, Little Hangleton!" Their mounts needed no more than this to instantly begin soaring northeast.

"Sorry, Harry," said Link over the sound of the wind and the wings. "It's just that I forgot. No big deal. So what did you want me to tell them again?"

"That's the problem. I wrote these notes saying exactly all the things I wanted to tell them, but I've left them back at Hogwarts."

Link frowned, thinking; his expression was one that Harry subconsciously thought of as property of Sirius Black. Then it unexpectedly became flat and guarded, though he still didn't speak. When he finally did give an answer, it wasn't one Harry had anticipated.

"Not a problem."

"What?"

"I've just asked Sheik," he explained, and Harry understood the blank expression. "He says that people usually don't really use words in the Sacred Realm. They can if they want to, but most of the time they just communicate ideas directly. That way, no language barriers, no misinterpretations, no lies."

"So...what do we do?"

"We form a telepathic connection. Then I can get your thoughts to them, exactly as you mean them. In fact, this way's better, because telepathy is permanent." He shot Harry a flash of a smile. "It can't be broken by a little thing like death."

"You mean..." Harry began slowly, not knowing where his sentence was going. He found a smile crossing his face as well, a smile that grew from a contentment deeper than superficial happiness.

"We'll be able to talk to each other forever. We'll have to use words and not ideas, because you're still alive, but that's no big deal. Plus, from where I am, I can see what's going on back on the mortal plane. And I can pass things back and forth between you and...anyone else in the Sacred Realm who you might want to communicate with."

They both grinned, and for some reason Harry felt something swelling in his chest. It was almost out of his mouth before he realized that it was, unaccountably, laughter. He let out a brief shout of it, punctuated with adrenaline, without fully understanding why. He thought it had something to do with freedom.

Link was smiling widely, with the same sort of strange and almost inappropriate happiness. "Come here," he instructed Harry. "Fly right up alongside me."

Harry obeyed, and watched as Link took his hands off of the Thestral's reins, balancing with his knees. He reached out his arms towards Harry, who didn't know how to respond.

"Come on, give me your hands," Link said, once he recognized Harry's confusion.

"What?! I'll fall!"

Link snorted. "You ride a broom with no hands while iron balls are flinging themselves at your head, and this thing actually has a saddle. Now give me your hands."

While this was a good point, there was still the fact that Harry tended to play Quidditch at a considerably lower height than this. Still, he could see no point in objecting.

Squeezing his mount's sides with his knees so hard he thought he might break an equine rib, Harry slowly released his own reins and reached out for Link. He didn't dare breathe.

"All right," said the Hylian, gasping Harry's hands firmly. "Now, just remain calm and hold still."

Harry raised his eyebrows. The latter instruction went without saying, and the former was impossible. Link, however, was too focused to notice Harry's scepticism. He had closed his eyes, and was taking deep, meditative breaths that made a strange rasping noise.

At first, Harry felt nothing except extreme discomfort, both physical and emotional. Then he felt a warm sensation in his hands that wasn't just body heat, spreading up his arms, into his body, as though he suddenly had more blood pumping life through his veins. When the warmth reached his mind, he felt Link's thoughts, but they came as words.

:Breathe like me.:

So Harry did, emitting the same odd sounds so that the breath felt like it were coming from a deeper part of him than just his lungs.

:This is the connection: came Link's voice in his head again.

Harry found that he knew how to communicate back, simply by sending his thoughts to the front of his mind, from which point they easily slipped out and across to Link.

:Okay... But what happens if we let go?:

:We let go slowly, to let our minds get acclimatized to the change. Then nothing happens. We keep the connection, but we can open and close it whenever we want to talk.:

And so they very slowly released the grips they each had on the other's hands, which, Harry was only now realizing, were so tight it was painful. The warmth receded slightly, but it didn't go away completely. Even when they had fully let go and settled themselves back securely onto their mounts—they had been dangerously unstable—Harry felt as though his mind was closer to the front of his consciousness, and that Link's was nearly touching it. Having someone so close, yet without invading his privacy, was very reassuring. It wasn't like Legilimens, which forced his mind and memory open. It was kind and gentle and under his control.

:There: thought Link. :Right now we're using words, or we can think emotions and pictures, because we're both on the mortal plane. We can't just use thoughts yet, like we could if we were both in the Sacred Realm.: He paused before adding as an afterthought, :I've never done telepathy that way before.:

:What, with thoughts instead of words? Or by holding hands?:

Link sent his laughter, and Harry heard it silently. :Well, both, actually, now that you mention it. I've never had to start a connection like that before... Zel opened my powers the first time, and she did it with the Ocarina of Time somehow... She was always better at that stuff than me.:

Harry smirked; she had said the same thing outside the Forbidden Forest.

Abruptly, the Thestrals pointed their heads to the ground and dove. Harry felt a thrill of terror; though the mental presence of Link was reassuring, it didn't stop his stomach from turning inside out and his body setting itself on fire in panic. He could feel his heart fluttering in his chest, as though beating against the walls of his body and begging to be freed. A loud cry lingered in his throat, threatening to explode, and holding it in only made him feel he might go mad. It actually hurt. He allowed himself a small whimper to release the tension, but it made him collapse from within. He suddenly could think of nothing but how he longed to get away and never, never have to face a Death Eater again as long as he lived, to escape into some happy bubble where no unpleasant thing was real.

Link must have sensed this uncharacteristic fear, because he informed Harry, :After I die, you'll never be scared again.:

To himself, Harry thought, *You're a Gryffindor...you're a descendant of Gryffindor! You are the pride of James and Lily Potter and Sirius Black! You are the next True Hero, of the bloodline of Link !! You are the one destined to destroy Voldemort—*

Or have him destroy you—

The goddesses will not let evil win!

This last thought surprised Harry so much that he abandoned the others. The goddesses. Other than a passing reference the letter he had left with Dobby for his friends, he had never thought about them. But they were real, they had to be, because Link and Zelda were here...and because one of Harry's distant aunts, thousands of years ago, reigned in the Sacred Realm as a demi-goddess...

The Thestrals landed softly. They had arrived. The battle was about to begin.

The large, crumbling house looked like an abused victim of Voldemort's reign of terror. Ivy spread over its face, trying to hide its wounds, as victims in denial so often did. It was weak and vulnerable.

Harry hated it. He wanted to utterly destroy the place that housed so much evil. He drew a deep breath as he dismounted from his horse, his heart jolting unpleasantly. He saw Link look at him sideways.

:Are you okay?:

:I want to do this. I really need to do this.: Even though he didn't know why.

He drew his wand, clutching it tightly in his sweating hand. He barely saw Link give the signal that meant *advance*.

As one, they moved silently across the lawn of the Riddle House towards its looming shape. It seemed strange to Harry that they could just walk up to it...surely Voldemort would have some sort of protection surrounding his headquarters, other than the ones they had already infiltrated.

When they were within ten feet of the entrance, his doubts were answered—a jet of red light shot out of a broken window and struck Elphias in the chest, and though he gave only the slightest cry as he fell, they all knew that the Stunner meant the Death Eaters were ready to fight.

"MOVE!" bellowed Link, but they knew the plan, and were all already sprinting.

In the instant chaos that ensued, Harry saw and heard Stunning Spells, Unforgivable Curses and other enchantments flying to and from both sides. The Order members crowded him protectively, as per their attack strategy, but not so closely that he couldn't help in the battle.

"*Protego! Stupefy! Stupefy!*"

Harry pointed his wand at every window he could see, aiming around the allies that ran in front of him. The instant they reached the door and swarmed through it, they switched into a different battle mode. Dumbledore, Sheik, Link and Harry moved closer together and hurried up the stairs, along with all the Order members, to find the Death Eaters that had been attacking them from the windows. They

didn't have to look far, however, as Voldemort's followers emerged into the halls on the second and third floors in numbers Harry wouldn't have imagined. He had been under the impression that they only visited here when they needed to communicate with their leader, but now it seemed that this was in fact where many of them lived.

On the ground floor, more were Apparating in quick succession with loud cracks like a series of gunshots, and Harry knew that Voldemort must have summoned them all with the Dark Mark. He wondered if Wormtail would make an appearance, or Lucius Malfoy...

Or Bellatrix Lestrange...

"Avada kedavra!!"

The sound of the incantation, though he didn't recognize the voice, made Harry jump. A jet of light was flying through the air towards where he stood with Link, but the Hero of Time was unfazed, and slashed quickly before himself with his sword like a bat. Just as during the demonstration in Tonks' class, the Master Sword sent the energy back from where it had come, and it struck a masked Death Eater, who screamed in agony as it seized him, and fell backwards into one of his fellows.

But there was no time to stop and wonder at this. At each turn, a few Order members branched off to engage the Death Eaters they met in combat. By the time they arrived at the top, where they knew the two Dark Lords waited, only four of them would remain to fight.

And no doubt those Dark Lords were waiting with bated breath to fight for the power of the goddesses...

Link was in front when the four of them reached the fourth floor, the top, and turned a sharp left towards the room where Harry knew Voldemort always stationed himself, the room that the others had seen in his memory. Link was the first to explode through the double doors, kicking them open with the superhuman strength granted to him, even in his current form, by the gauntlets of gold that he wore on his arms. The resounding *boom* that echoed through the house as the doors cracked off their hinges announced the presence of Wisdom and Courage.

There stood Power, both of its representatives; Ganondorf grinned demonically, and Voldemort met his opponents gaze with cool evenness. Harry, of course, was completely unsurprised by the sight of them, but he heard Link next to him give a shuddering gasp of horror.

:I dreamed about that man...that...*thing*...when I was a kid!: he thought, before Harry could ask.

:He's evil: Harry thought back with furious bitterness.

:I know.:

As if their thoughts had been audible, and Voldemort wished to prove his reputation, he said smoothly, "Delighted to see all of you. And I'm sure this will shape up to be a fine epic battle." He was smiling widely, even as his four opponents advanced on him and his ally; it unnerved Harry. It was almost like Voldemort was expecting something else, that would turn the battle in his favour...

"My Lord!" came a voice from the doorway that turned Harry's blood to ice. He whipped around, and felt Dumbledore gripping his shoulder.

Bellatrix stood there, wand out, clearly having come from the middle of her own fight. There was no trace of fear on her features as she noticed Harry and Dumbledore standing there.

"Ah, Bella," said Voldemort, in as warm a voice as could issue from his cold face. "I thought you might like to greet our young guest. Or rather, I thought he might like to greet you."

Somewhere in the depths of his mind, Harry knew this was mere manipulation. She was here to distract and tempt Harry, to draw him away from his battle with Voldemort.

Somewhere, Harry knew this. But the most basic and primal urges of his soul knew no logic. Bellatrix had killed Sirius, and Harry's resultant bloodlust against her was greater than he was. He only wanted to know that she was in pain that he was the cause of it. And when she begged him for mercy and saw the error of her ways, he wanted to look into her eyes as he denied it, and gave her death

instead. He hadn't realized until that moment how he had simmered in his own rage for nearly a year.

Something inside him burst without warning.

He was hardly aware that he was running, that she was laughing as she ran away, that Dumbledore, Link and Sheik were calling his name. He only saw that Bellatrix was here and alive when Sirius wasn't, and that this was not how it should have been. He heard only his own pounding pulse in his ears, his own fury beating through his mind...

"Harry!" shouted Link, reaching to grab at the teenager's arm, but missing. He moved to go after him, but stopped when he heard the laugh that never failed to send a surge of wrath coursing through his blood.

"So," Ganondorf chuckled humourlessly, "that is the boy who is to follow in your footsteps? The one foolhardy enough to run straight into the arms of death in a futile quest for someone he loves? I must say, the resemblance between you is certainly striking."

Link didn't speak. His jaw was set as he trembled with rage from head to toe; there was nothing he could say that could adequately express the centuries of hatred he had built up against this man...who had cost him everything...who had devastated his world...and his family...so many times...

For the last time, restored to their first incarnations, they would face each other in combat.

Finally, Link raised his sword to point directly at his nemesis and said in a forced tone, "I will send you back to the creators, and make Their world a better place forever by taking you out of it."

"Going to send me to hell, are you?" Ganon smirked. "I'll be sure to give your wife and daughters my love."

The same force which had driven Harry after Bellatrix now sent Link across the room within a second, sword flashing like lightning so that Ganon had to jump out of the way to dodge it. The other three in the

room stood back; Voldemort watched with a calculating look in his cold eyes, Dumbledore kept his gaze locked onto Link's face, and Sheik stood poised with the tension of a predatory animal to jump into the battle the instant he was needed.

After dodging Link's first attack, Ganon launched one of his own, striking out with one of his fists, charged with magical power. Link swerved to avoid the blow, stabbing his blade forward, but Ganon knocked it aside with the back of his other hand before lunging forward and knocking the Hylian to the floor on his back. Rolling with the attack, Link caught Ganon in the stomach with both feet as the evil king dived forward to assault him further, using the larger man's weight against him to send him flying overhead. Ganon almost landed hard on his back, but skilfully summoned his powers of levitation to stop his own fall and land lightly as Link sprang up to his feet again. But even as the Hero turned around to face his opponent, the evil king delivered him a vicious kick to the face. The dizzying blow sent him flying back.

Sheik bit back his scream as Link, his immaterial weight insubstantial compared to Ganondorf's, slammed flat into the wall. He tried to regain his footing, but his legs clearly wouldn't support his weight. Cackling wickedly, Ganondorf strode forward in victory as Link slowly crumpled to the floor, the Master Sword slipping from his grip.

"I'm going to enjoy this..." he growled, hauling Link back to his feet by the collar to shove him back up against the wall. "Finally, crushing the life out of you once and for all... It has been a pleasure denied me for too long..."

It was against every urge in Sheik's body to stand back and watch this without helping, but for some reason, Link was sending one constant thought to him: :Not yet... Don't do anything yet...:

But Sheik doubted Link even knew what he was doing now. He was groping over his shoulder for the hilt of his sword, apparently forgetting completely that it was lying on the floor at Ganon's feet.

:Link: he though desperately, as Ganon drew back his fist and charged it with fiery purple magic that could deliver a blow of unimaginable force, :please just let me—:

:Now!:

If Sheik hadn't been used to combat, he would have been too surprised to react to the order; as it was, he kept his head enough to leap forward and thrust out both hands with a blast of magic far greater than Ganondorf's. As he did, he saw that Link hadn't been reaching for his missing sword, but for his quiver, from which he had drawn a Light Arrow, to drive by hand into Ganon's throat.

The magic radiating from Link's arrow and Sheik's hands seized Ganon at the same time, enveloping him in a deadly force field of yellow light and energy. He roared in fury and pain, glowing too brightly for either Dumbledore or Voldemort to look directly at, and released Link without noticing it. The Hylian warrior dropped to his feet nimbly and grabbed his blade off of the floor, any trace of injury or weakness gone from his eyes. As Sheik continued to hold Ganon in place with magic, Link sheathed his sword to draw another arrow, this time along with his bow.

"Sorry, Ganon," he commented, calmly taking aim against the helpless Dark Lord that had now fallen to his knees; this was how he was always to die, with the magic of the Sages holding him down for the magic of the Master Sword to destroy him utterly. "But I'm afraid you can't crush the life out of a soul. You could never have won this fight."

"What?"

Ganon's voice was venomous, as he managed to crane his neck around to look at his ally. Voldemort remained utterly calm, his pitiless red eyes fixed on Ganon with as much mercy as he would have shown anyone who tried to oppose him.

"You..." the Gerudo king choked, "you knew this...and you would send me to my death..."

"I cannot possess your piece of the Triforce while you live, Ganon," Voldemort replied unconcernedly. "You must die, and take these children with you, so that those of us present can receive our destinies."

Link's eyes, focused on aiming his arrow, widened in sudden horror.
Those of us present...

:Harry!:

Harry had never run so fast and so tirelessly, tearing down the hall after her with no regard for who or what he was colliding with and flinging out of the way, ally or enemy, as he went.

Bellatrix ran through a large set of grand double doors, and Harry heard the deadbolt slide into place. With vicious, bitter satisfaction, he wondered just how weak she thought he was.

"*Reducto!*" he shouted, but the force of his emotions was so strong that he was practically crackling with magical energy already, and the spell was exploding from him even as he said the incantation. It didn't just blast a hole in the doors; it reduced them, with a blast of bomb-like force, to rubble. He saw the form of a person lying in the destruction as the dust settled, and slowly moved towards it, wand at the ready. He knew better than to think that she was dead. Besides, he hadn't even given her a taste of what she deserved...

She was lying on her stomach, her arms over her head protectively, evidently having dived for cover. When Harry approached, she rolled over sharply with an evil, victorious grin on her face—it flickered only slightly when she saw that Harry was ready for her, his glare murderous.

"What do you think you're going to do to me, little baby Potter?" she asked sneeringly. Harry saw her hand moving through the wreckage, feeling for her wand, which lay only inches away from her fingertips. Without a word, without looking away from her, moving perfectly calmly despite how he quivered internally with pent-up rage, he took one step and placed his weight firmly onto the wand. It quietly snapped beneath his heel, the sound distinct despite the roaring white noise of combat nearby.

Bellatrix froze, and though she still betrayed no fear on her face, he could see her mind working quickly to think of a way to get herself out

of this. She didn't move, and neither did Harry, though he kept his wand aimed directly at her face.

Then she made a sudden move to leap to her feet, and Harry bellowed automatically, "*Crucio!*"

He had tried this spell on her before, and it hadn't worked. But his grief had been too fresh then to let him focus properly on how much he wanted to make her feel pain. She had said that such a desire was important. Now he had it. Now the spell came effortlessly, and she was screaming, her body rigid and twitching where she had collapsed again in the debris. He found himself bearing his teeth in a twisted hybrid between a grimace and a smile. He found himself *enjoying* this...

:Harry!:

His concentration snapped as suddenly as if Link's thoughts had cut off his power source. Bellatrix fell limp. She was not dead, nor unconscious, but so weak that she didn't move, except to breathe shakily. Harry blinked and tried to pull his mind back onto a rational plane.

:Link...aren't you fighting?: he managed to think.

:It's ending, Harry. You have to come here, *now*.: The urgency was sincere and obvious.

:Yes...:

Though his mind was suspended in bewilderment, he knew he couldn't leave Bellatrix like this. She was starting to unsteadily pull herself up.

"*Stupefy*," said Harry bluntly. With a short cry of annoyance and surprise, she again fell limp.

Half of Harry's mind was still swirling with blank confusion as he ran back down the hall, filled with duelling Death Eaters and Order members whose faces he didn't take in, towards where he knew Link

and Sheik had ended their battle. He had just used an Unforgivable Curse...and used it effectively...

"This is why you need to understand that Voldemort is a human—So that you know, when the time comes that you may hold his life in your hands, that anyone could have become what he has. You could have."

Unbidden, Dumbledore's words spoke in Harry's mind, in a very different manner from how Link's did, but just as real.

When he appeared in the doorway to Voldemort's chamber, Harry could feel the tangible tension in the room, so intense that it was like the heat of the sun and drove him to stay away from its nucleus. The energy of the Triforce quivered through the air as its three parts stood so close they could nearly touch. Ganon was on the ground, fighting with all his strength against the throbbing yellow light that held him down. It had its source from Sheik, who knelt nearby with his hands held out towards their target, though his disguise was coming loose and Zelda was visible beneath it; the effort of the prolonged spell had rendered her unable to stand by her own power. Link was standing over Ganon, his bow bent and nocked with a Light Arrow that was straining to fly to its target; though the Master Sword was sheathed on his back, Harry could still sense the weapon's burning desire to find its mark, charged to kill.

Harry took in all of this in one instant—so brief he didn't even have time to see what Voldemort and Dumbledore were doing—for in the next, Link let out a cry of relief and released his arrow. With a startlingly loud ringing sound, it struck Ganon in the chest, just below his collarbone, and he let out an agonized bellow. Even as he did, Link drew his sword on the rebound of releasing the bowstring, and it lunged out as if of its own accord. Harry saw and heard jarring chunks of the scene as it barraged his senses overpoweringly.

Link struck repeatedly, all the physical strength of his soul straining into this one task—

Ganon roared like a dying animal as the blade sank into his back, between his ribs—

Sheik, now clearly Zelda, gave a faint gasp and lost consciousness altogether as her spell ended and she fell, limp, to the thinly carpeted floor—

Voldemort shouted something—

Dumbledore shouted, too—

Harry didn't have time to react to either one—

And then he felt completely winded, as green light overtook him like a hurricane, and he was helpless to resist...it surged through his body with such force that he thought it impossible that he wasn't dying...and yet, somehow, it didn't hurt...

Managing to compose himself enough to look around, Harry saw that he was not the only one suspended in time and space like this. Link, too, was barely visible at the centre of a blinding mass of green energy where he had collapsed next to Ganon, who was engulfed in red; Zelda, a few feet away, was unbearably bright blue, like Dumbledore, who stood just behind her; across the room, the same red light that consumed Ganon also held Voldemort.

Harry felt a strange sensation on the back of his right hand—it burned, but it wasn't painful. Looking down, he saw the insignia of the Triforce appearing there...the lower right triangle was becoming brighter...

Though he couldn't see, Harry knew that the back of Link's left hand must have been burning the same way as his triangle faded...

Even if he had been able to move, Harry wouldn't have been able to think clearly enough to act as the Triforce of Courage coursed through him, filling him until he thought that he would scream just to relieve some of the energy. It was like music, so loud, so bass, so treble, so all-consuming, that he felt rather than heard it. It crescendoed, an adrenaline rush so intense it made him feel ill—

Then it dropped, so sharply and without warning that Harry would have fallen over if not for the fact that the force field of green had not relinquished its hold on him. But, like the telepathic connection with Link, the feeling was still there on some level.

Even though Link wasn't.

Everything became real again as the green light faded entirely. Ganon's lifeless body, grotesquely slaughtered, remained, his blood soaking the carpet around it, but Link and Zelda were completely gone. All that was left as proof of their existence were the brilliantly clean Master Sword and the bright gold Triforce pendant. The world, which had slowed down for the transfer of divine magic, was rapidly returning to its normal pace.

Harry sprang forward and grabbed the Master Sword from where it lay next to Ganon's corpse, barely having time to marvel inwardly that the sight of this violence didn't make him sick and disgusted, and felt its blue and gold scabbard materialize on his back, alongside his quiver and bow. He heard Dumbledore call, "*Accio!*" and saw the pendant fly to his hand.

It was then that the reality of the situation struck Harry full force—he was standing in a room with *Voldemort*, armed with the legendary weapons necessary to defeat the Triforce of Power, and with the Courage of the goddesses enriching his soul.

And he was completely, miraculously, unafraid.

Voldemort laughed, in a high, cold way that didn't send chills up Harry's spine. "Do you suppose you can face and defeat me with your sword, Potter?"

But Harry wasn't stupid. He knew there was no way he could win this fight yet. Not while Voldemort had his own Triforce piece, combined with the strength of the Unforgivable Curses, not while Harry was still learning to use his own tools. They had passed on the conflict from the people of Hyrule to the people of the new world. Harry had done what he had come to do. The task now was to get out alive, so that he could return to fight another day, when he could win.

And there was still Bellatrix—He would not let her get away.

Without a word, he ran again from the room, ignoring the fact that both Voldemort and Dumbledore shouted after him.

In the hall again, Harry took in his surroundings for the first time. Death Eaters and Order members had fallen around him, some that he recognized, some that he didn't, but he didn't look closely at any of them. His eyes raked the crowd, for he knew that she would have freed herself from his Stunning Spell by now, and spotted his target on the landing of the wide stairway one floor below. She was engaged in combat with Remus, somehow having gotten a wand, probably confiscated from one of the fallen fighters. Her name growled across Harry's mind: *Bellatrix...*

Before he could move to bolt down the stairs after her, a figure Apparated before him. With a wave of annoyance at the interruption, Harry noticed that it was Voldemort. He also noticed, on some level amid his tumultuous fury, how odd it was to feel not even the slightest trace of fear, but merely complete confidence.

"I'm not afraid of you," he snapped irritably. "You can't do anything that would scare me or hurt me. Not anymore."

"Oh, no?" Voldemort laughed coldly. "Let's find out if you're right...*Avada kedavra!*"

"*Protego!*"

The spell flew from Harry's lips before he even thought about it. His instincts knew exactly what to do. The jet of deadly light ricocheted away, and Voldemort swerved to dodge it, so that it shot across the room and gouged a hole in the opposite wall from which flames licked. Harry calmly calculated the situation as he felt his Shield Charm tremble, and a wave of weakness, nausea and pain strike him; though he didn't die, he knew he needed more effective protection. The killing curse was supposed to be impossible to block, and Harry suspected that it tested even the limits of the Triforce itself to do so.

Voldemort, too, appeared to be evaluating the situation at light speed. However, he showed no trace of concern, but only anger that Harry had managed to escape the spell.

"So you've picked up a thing or two under Dumbledore's instruction," he observed. "But you'll need more than that. *Crucio!*"

This time, still without so much as needing to think, by reflex, Harry swung the Master Sword vertically to deflect the curse, just as Link had done so many times. Even as he did, he jumped sideways and made to run forward, in an attempt to step past Voldemort and make his way down the stairs, but of course it couldn't be that easy. The Cruciatus Curse cracked the hardwood floor where Voldemort had been standing, but he had already moved to block Harry, reaching out to catch him around the chest. The Dark Lord flung his young opponent backwards by hand so that Harry staggered and fell.

"And the Hero taught you to fight, too," he growled, eyes on fire, advancing on Harry where he now lay, frozen, sprawled on the hallway floor. "And still, it won't be enough."

But Harry was still not afraid. He couldn't be. He was a True Hero. He was the descendant of Sir Link I Hero, son of Farore, and possessed of the Triforce of Courage.

And the Triforce of Wisdom supported him, as well. From the room he had just left, Harry heard Dumbledore's voice shout an incantation he couldn't make out, and a jet of pale light shot toward Voldemort. To dodge the assault, he Disapparated, and the place where he had been standing was encased in ice when Dumbledore's spell struck it. Harry, glad that the stairway was now free, leapt to his feet and sprinted forward, leaping onto the banister and sliding down it skilfully to escape any other spells Voldemort might have flung after him, but the one remaining Dark Lord now had his attentions focused on the only man he deemed worthy of his fear.

"Harry, no!"

Harry barely registered Remus' voice as he alighted and practically flew at Bellatrix in an incoherent rage. He didn't register that Voldemort had stopped firing spells at him, or that Dumbledore was neither backing him up nor holding him back, or that no one from either side was nearby, as they all were now rushing downstairs for some reason. But he had to notice Link.

:Stop, Harry!:

"I won't!" he shouted, the words thundering through his mind and his voice alike as he raised his wand. "*Stupefy!*"

"This isn't your fight!" came Remus' voice, as he continued to engage Bellatrix. "*Impedimenta!* Just get out!"

Ducking spells on two fronts and armed with a wand that wasn't hers, Bellatrix had no chance of launching an effective offensive of her own.

:*Stop!*:

"No!" Harry insisted furiously. "I have to...I *have* to! *Locomotor mortis!*"

Two jets of magic struck Bellatrix in the chest at once, one from Harry, another from Remus. Her legs snapped together, as a result of the first, and the second struck her a blow to the side of the head that knocked her down.

This was the moment. Harry's brain pounded with satisfaction at this victory. He felt as if he were in a dream, his body not really his own, as he moved forward, raising the Master Sword over her as she gasped for breath, watching him with wide eyes, unable to clamber back to her feet.

:*Sirius says stop.*:

Harry felt his heart and his stomach turn over. :What?:

:*Your father says stop. Your mother says stop.*:

:How—Why—:

:*I'm here with them, and they all just want you not to kill her.*:

Harry felt dizzy, and closed his eyes against the pain. He knew Link had to be telling the truth...but he didn't want to believe it...

:No: he insisted, with all that remained of his strength. :She...she killed Sirius! She deserves this!:

:No: Link contradicted him firmly. *:She deserves more than to be slaughtered like an animal without first understanding her crimes.:*

:She knows what she did.:

:But she doesn't understand.:

:No: Harry thought, yet again. :I mean—yes. She knows why...She knows what...:

:Remember the Shrieking Shack?:

This question was so unexpected that Harry almost dropped the sword that he still held raised over the helpless woman at his feet. Lowering it slightly, he thought numbly, :What?:

:Sirius says, remember in the Shrieking Shack two or three years ago, when you stopped him and Moony killing Wormtail? You didn't think your father would have wanted his best friends to become killers.:

Harry couldn't breathe.

:Well, your father doesn't want his son to become a killer, either.:

Harry became aware of the silent tears streaming down his face unchecked, though his eyes were still closed, and he made no move to dry them. His arms, holding the Master Sword before him, began to tremble violently. His right hand throbbed.

:Please: he begged, thinking not only to Link, :let me end this...:

:Not like this, Harry.:

All the energy drained out of Harry's body at once as the overwhelming desire to just give up flooded him. Eyes still closed, he dropped his head back, nearly dropping his sword, and would have sunk to his knees if a firm grip hadn't seized him by the arm and pulled him away.

"Come on, Harry!"

Remus, who sounded urgent and alarmed...

Suddenly, Harry realized he was hot...

Opening his eyes, taking in his surroundings, Harry's heart leapt to his throat when he realized why nothing had interrupted his conversation with Link—everyone had fled the building, which was being overtaken by flame.

"What—?" Harry began to ask, but he remembered the answer before he completed the question; the deflected Avada Kedavra curse had set fire to one of the walls, and now it was spreading.

From somewhere, he found the energy to run, alongside Remus, out of the building. A corner of his mind screamed that Bellatrix still lay in the rubble, but another part thought he had seen, in the split second before he had started running, that she was gone...perhaps she had Disapparated during the period when Harry hadn't been watching her...or Voldemort might have somehow gotten all of his followers out with him...

All he really knew was that he and Remus had burst out of the front door now, onto the lawn and out into the fresh air; the wind felt alarmingly and wonderfully cold against his skin and tearing through his hair. He looked back only briefly, in time to see the flames beginning to whip into sight, precluded by clouds of sinister smoke. The Riddle House would never survive.

Only when they were both out and safe did Remus release his grip on Harry, who mechanically sheathed his sword on his back. He stood still a moment longer, then wiped his tears with the back of his hand, taking in the smell of the smoke on his body as he did so. Somehow, this filled him with another throbbing pang of grief, and he buried his face in his hands to escape it, pressing against his eyes, willing all the pain that ached inside him to just slip out as his tears were so easily doing even now. He heard himself moan quietly.

Someone was embracing him with warm arms, pulling him against a warm heart that was beating a hard, fierce rhythm just like that of his own; it was Remus again, and Harry curled up against him like a lost child.

Once, there had been the unstoppable Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs. Now, all that remained of their shattered legacy was a man isolated, deprived and aged beyond his years, and a teenage boy being crushed from within by his own identity. They had each other, and at that moment, both felt they had nothing else.

Chapter Sixteen—Different Perspectives

Endless white light and a deafening rush of music swirled around Link as the Sacred Realm took form around him. The only solid things were Zelda, who had come with him, and Harry's three parents, Lily, James and Sirius, whom he had so desperately needed to see that they had materialized in this vision of the realm as soon as he did. They had discussed Harry briefly, because it was an emergency, but now all was spiralling nothingness again.

"Hey—What the hell is going on?" asked Sirius sharply. "One minute you're telling us you're talking to Harry..."

"And who are you?" interrupted Lily; her eyes were wide with amazement as she stared at the two Hylians, gripping James tightly by the arm, because there was nothing else.

"I was talking to Harry," Link insisted. "I told you, he was going to kill her—"

"But who are you? How do you know him?"

Zelda opened her mouth to answer, but quite suddenly, the world appeared. To Link and Zelda, it appeared as their image of home—Hyrule Field. They blinked in the brightness as colours and silence returned, trying to regain their vision and hearing.

The first thing Link became aware of was Zelda's cry, and he reflexively reached over his shoulder, remembering even as his grip closed over empty air that his sword was gone. Besides that, this was the Sacred Realm, so she shouldn't have been in trouble—

The next thing he became aware of was a pair of arms throwing themselves tightly around his neck with such force that he staggered, and he panicked until he recognized a familiar warm body pressed against him and pulling him into a passionate kiss.

"Malon..." he murmured, smiling beneath her lips as he embraced her back.

"I missed you so much," she told him, communicating with thoughts in a way they had never been able to do while she was alive; she hadn't been telepathic then.

"Er... If you four don't mind getting off each other," came James' voice rather pointedly, "I believe we need some clarification."

Pulling his focus onto what was going on around him, Link saw the reason for Zelda's earlier exclamation; she and Chezdon were looking up from sharing a similar reunion to that of him and Malon.

More significantly, however, he noticed that there were dozens of people surrounding them, divisible into two distinct groups: humans and Hylians, people who knew Harry and people who knew him and Zelda. All of them had been coexisting in the Sacred Realm, but not in the same version, because they didn't know each other. Now that the connection between them had arrived, however, they suddenly found themselves thrown together. Everyone (including Malon and Chezdon, once they looked around and saw that they weren't alone) looked utterly confused.

"Well, then," Zelda said, grinning sheepishly at Link, "introductions all around, I suppose..."

How long the world stood still, how long he and Remus stood there, suspended in existence and mourning cathartically, Harry never knew. Too soon, he felt another hand take his own and place it on a piece of debris. Dumbledore's voice counted to three, and in a swirl of colour, they were at Hogwarts.

It was a jarringly different atmosphere. Harry blinked the last of his tears away and slowly pulled away from Remus, wiping his face hard with his hand again. Dumbledore strolled to the window behind his desk, gazing at the now sunny sky outside and apparently lost in thought.

Harry knew the Headmaster would now offer some explanation, but of what, he couldn't hazard a guess. So he simply waited. Minutes passed in silence before Dumbledore moved to take his seat behind

his desk and said quietly, gesturing to the two chairs opposite his, "Harry...Remus... Would you?"

There was always the right number of chairs in Dumbledore's office. Both Harry and Remus moved rather shakily as they stepped forward to take their seats. Remus was looking into Dumbledore's perfectly composed face, and Harry, staring at his own empty hands in his lap, didn't know how he managed it.

"There isn't much to say," the Headmaster began quietly. "You both know what happened this morning. And I think you both understand it. However, I also think you both will need a moment before you are ready to rejoin the rest of the world."

He couldn't have been more right. Harry nodded mutely; Remus turned to him, fixing a slightly trembling hand on his shoulder, and said in an equally trembling voice, "You know that I'm always here to help you." Despite the weak grasp he held on his emotions, he was sincere, and that was what mattered. "If you anything...help, or advice...or just someone to talk to...you know I'm always here. Okay?"

Again, Harry nodded, still unable to speak.

Remus tried to say more, but stopped himself. He then made an uncertain movement, clearly not knowing how to end the conversation, and said in the most businesslike tone he could muster, "Goodbye. I'll see you both."

He rose and walked away silently, closing the door behind him with a faint click. Harry listened to his slow footsteps fading away.

After another short silence, Dumbledore leaned towards Harry and said in his softest, most considerate voice, "You are not alone."

Harry said nothing, and though he tried to look up, he couldn't do it.

"Sometimes you think you are the only person in the world who understands or cares about your own life, and that is when you let your emotions become so tangled and overwrought that even you no longer understand what drives you, and you almost lose control of

yourself. So far, you have always managed to rein yourself in when it mattered most, but...it is a dangerous balance, Harry."

Still, Harry could find no words. Dumbledore paused, then spoke again, in a stronger voice.

"During his quest to awaken the Sages, as he may have told you, Link was forced to do battle with a doppelganger of himself incarnate in shadow—Dark Link. This being was not only a hardened and heartless warrior, but also the embodiment of everything the real Link hated about himself and the world: his anger, his self-doubt, his painful childhood... his destiny... In battling this demon, Link not only conquered a physical challenge, but a psychological one. He faced the dark side of his own heart, and he won. And he learned what lurked within him, his own potential for both good and evil."

Harry remembered what Link had told him—"Killing myself was the hardest thing I've ever had to do..."

Dumbledore continued to speak. "After that, he knew how important it was to trust the people that cared about him—He had Navi, his guardian fairy, and Saria, who raised him, and all the Sages, and Zelda, and Malon, who was his wife as well as his friend." With a faint smile, he added, "He even had his horse, Epona. You have people like that, too, Harry. Don't shut all of us out of your life and your heart. We only want to help you. Your ability to love is the key to your success. Remember that."

Harry could think of no adequate way to express all that tumbled through his tired mind as Dumbledore spoke. The simplest thing to say was...

"Thank you."

"You are truly welcome," Dumbledore replied, a hint of a sigh in his voice as he leaned back in his chair. "Now, if you are ready for them, I think your friends will be looking for you."

Harry glanced out the window, at the sun that was well on its way to reaching its peak. He could picture Ron and Hermione, and doubtless

every other Gryffindor, torturing themselves and each other with worry over him.

When he reached for the doorknob, he caught a glimpse of the back of his right hand. The Triforce mark; though he knew it would eventually fade as he adjusted to his new role, now stood out like a birthmark. And Dumbledore and Voldemort had it, too.

He would take his time returning to Gryffindor Tower. He still needed to think.

"Oh, *Harry!*"

"HARRY!"

As soon as he stepped into the common room, over an hour later, Harry was attacked. Ron and Hermione were, of course, at the front lines, but the rest of Gryffindor house charged at him, too. Hermione touched his head and arms all over like a doctor checking for injuries, and Ron gripped his wrist to hold him still and scan him for any signs that he wasn't okay. When he passed both of their inspections, which happened at the same moment, Hermione wrapped him in a suffocating hug, and Ron went limp and released the breath he had been holding. The rest of the Gryffindors were shouting.

"Where *were* you?"

"Where did you go?"

"Are you okay?"

"What's the big idea?"

"*Where* did you go?"

"Was it a battle?"

"What *happened?*"

"Okay, okay!" shouted Harry over the noise. His peers all shushed each other and fell silent themselves, fixing their awed gazes on him intensely. "Let me sit down, and I'll tell you everything." He had known this scene would greet him, so he had braced himself for it before daring to return to the tower.

The crowd followed him to his usual seat by the fire, and just as he had settled into it, he heard, "Hey... Where're Link and Zelda?"

Harry knew the reaction his answer would get, but he gave it anyway. "They're dead."

Sure enough, everyone gasped or screamed or swore or muttered. Only Ron, uncharacteristically, had the sense to say. "They were souls, they weren't really alive to begin with! So dying could have been too bad for them, could it?"

As one, the Gryffindors turned to Harry for an answer, and he said, "Yeah, actually, they were looking forward to it. They wanted to die once and for all. They intended to die when we left this morning."

"So where did you *go*?" Katie Bell pressed.

"Was it a battle, Harry?" asked third-year Dennis Creevey eagerly.

"Yes."

Instead of the questioning chatter Harry had expected at this, they all fell, if possible, even more silent, and settled themselves in for a full story. Harry sighed.

"Not much to tell. We got up early, and a bunch of us went with Dumbledore, oh, and Tonks, too, to Voldemort's headquarters—"

He paused to roll his eyes and the collective shudder and gasp.

"We fought him and his Death Eaters, and Link and Zelda fought their enemy, Ganon, and they killed him. The magic that kept them alive was only designed to keep them here until his death, so when it was over, they just sort of...dissolved away."

Harry was amazed that he could tell the story so calmly when he still felt as though his very soul was trembling as he came down from the adrenaline rush of combat. But then, he supposed that he had purged enough grief with Remus that he had none left to feel—right now. Still, he was getting a headache and he wanted to rest. He rubbed his eyes hard.

"Hey, Harry, what's that?" spoke up a fourth-year girl.

"What's what?" he muttered without looking up.

"On your hand..." Ron said slowly.

Of course. "The Triforce," Harry explained wearily. "It'll fade after a while... It just means that I have the Triforce of Courage now that Link's gone, and Dumbledore has the Triforce of Wisdom."

"Cool! So You-Know-Who'll be no problem!" squealed another fourth-year girl, who was standing next to the first.

"Did you kill him today, Harry?" demanded a second-year boy.

Harry let out a hollow laugh. In answer, he said, "And Voldemort's got the Triforce of Power."

He could understand why they were horrorstruck at his words. Seamus swore under his breath; no one else spoke.

"If you don't have any more questions, I really didn't get much sleep last night," Harry muttered. No one seemed offended at his less-than-subtle hint; they all simply cleared out of the way. Ron and Hermione, however, stayed.

"So that's it, huh?" Ron said after a moment.

Harry nodded.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said softly, reaching out towards him. "I know you'll miss Link—"

"What? Is that why you think I'm upset?" asked Harry, blinking in surprise.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look. "You mean...it's not?" Ron asked uncertainly.

"No," said Harry, understanding now why they had been looking at him so fearfully while he told his story. "We formed a telepathic connection before he died, see, between our souls, so we can still talk."

Hermione raised her eyebrows as Ron's mouth fell open. "Harry, are you sure...?"

"You know there's such a thing as telepathy," Ron cut her off.

"Yes, but I just don't know if—"

"Hermione, it really doesn't matter to me what you believe about this," Harry said swiftly, "because I talked to him not long ago, and whether you think I really did or not doesn't change a thing." He smiled pleasantly, leaving her with a look of shock on her face.

Taking her hand, Ron said, "Sometimes you've just gotta have faith in things you can't prove, Hermione."

She closed her mouth, which was hanging open, and a smile made its way across her face. She shrugged, but said nothing else.

Harry leaned back in his chair with a sigh and closed his eyes, satisfied to be relaxing in the Gryffindor common room, in his favourite seat by the fireplace. He wondered vaguely if Link and Zelda, wherever they were, were as content as he was at this moment. Then, smiling to himself, he decided to find out.

:Link?:

:Hey.:

It was strange to be able to get a response as quick as thought this way, but definitely something he liked.

:Did you pass along my messages?:

:*Of course. No one can accuse me of ever not keeping a promise. Well, except Princess Ruto...*:

Harry laughed; Link had been engaged to the Princess of the Zoras, but then disappeared for seven years and broken it off when he returned.

"What's funny?" asked Ron.

"Link," Harry answered. "I'm talking to him right now."

Hermione looked up from the essay she had picked up to work on once Harry had finished his story, and raised her eyebrows. Harry shrugged and smirked, then closed his eyes again to continue the telepathic conversation.

:You're hilarious.:

:*I know.*:

He laughed again, before asking, :Did they have anything to say to me?:

:*You know that's a stupid question, Harry.*:

:Humour me.:

:*They said they've been watching you, and they couldn't love you more unless there were two of you.*:

Harry smiled without noticing it. :And what about you? What do they think of you?:

:*Well, we've just been talking for a bit, while me and Zel try and catch up with about a thousand people at once, but so far, they're great! You were right about Sirius, he's just like me. Your dad said that if I'd gone to Hogwarts in their day, Sirius would have had some competition, and there would have been four illegal Animagi running around. Your mom guesses it'll take about five minutes before we*

start wreaking havoc on the Sacred Realm the way they did at school, and Malon agrees... Me and your dad've gotta watch out for the redheads, Harry, they're trying to keep us out of trouble.:

Harry gave a snort. :Well, if you're part of the group, do you have a nickname, then? Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, Prongs and...?:

:No nickname yet, but I do have a...whaddya call it...Animagus form.:

:Yeah?:

:Sure, remember I told you people can turn into animals here? So now I can, and so can everyone else. You'll never guess what I turn into.:

:What?:

:A lion.:

Again, Harry laughed, in his head and aloud.

:I know: Link agreed, laughing as well. :What are the odds? And Zel's a cat, too. A panther, in typical Sheikah style. We figure it must run in the family.:

:So I wonder if that means I'll be a stag, too, like my Patronus, or else...I dunno, a horse or something.:

:If anyone's gonna be horse, it's Malon.:

:Why do you think that? And is she one?:

:Of course she is, because she's the most fanatical horse lover in any world. Although, incidentally, Sirius is a big horse fan, too. Used to be really good at show jumping.:

:Really?:

:Oh, yeah. Your dad's family owned summer property out in the country, and they had this dappled grey mare named Pepper that just loved Sirius. Your dad was pretty good at riding, too, but he says he

didn't like it that much, which your mum claims is just because he wasn't as good as Sirius.:

Harry felt a pang of something like sadness at hearing all this information. :I never knew any of that...:

:There's so much they want to tell you. Good thing we have all the time in this world and the next to share everything, huh?:

:Yeah: Harry thought, opening his eyes and looking over at where Ron was reading Hermione's essay over her shoulder as she explained some of the finer points to him. :Yeah, we've got to share everything.:

At that moment, his train of thought was interrupted by a shriek from the portrait hole.

"HARRY!"

Blinking, he barely had time to see who was there before she had crossed the room and collided with him in a whirlwind of red hair. She moved so fast that it took a moment for him to realize that she had thrown her arms around his neck and pulled him into a kiss.

She seemed to realize what she was doing at the same time that he did, because she leapt away as though she had been electrocuted, eyes wide in shock. In his mind, Harry heard Link's laughter.

:Well, I see you're busy...: he thought smugly.

:Oh, shut up...:

:...and I have some of my own catching up to do: his thoughts now trembled with suppressed mirth, :since I've just barely started to meet everyone, and I'm in the middle of it all right now... so we'll finish this conversation later. Bye!:

:Okay, get lost already!: Harry wondered if, wherever he was, Link could see him flushing.

"I—I...uh..." Ginny was stammering, as her cheeks flushed scarlet and she shrank on the spot, clearly wishing she could dissolve. Managing a weak smile, apparently hoping to gloss over what had just happened, she observed, "So you're okay."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Ron beat him to it. "Yeah, he is, but *you* are obviously not," he said sharply. "What the hell was that?"

If Ginny could have become any more crimson, she did at these words. She made several attempts to form sentences, but none came to fruition. "Well...I mean...I..."

Harry as well couldn't seem to find his voice. He mouthed soundlessly, but didn't know where to begin forming actual words.

"I think what Ginny's trying to say," Hermione spoke up, smiling, "is 'Welcome back, Harry.' And I think Harry's trying to say, 'Thanks, Ginny.' Why don't you take it from there?"

Both Ginny and Harry, who had glanced at her so that they would have something to look at besides each other, slowly rotated their heads back towards one another. Ginny cleared her throat.

"Welcome back, Harry."

"Thanks, Ginny."

There was a long, awkward pause.

"I'm glad to see you're okay," she finally spoke up again.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

Ron was still looking between them with a guarded expression, and Ginny was clearly straining to find a subject that was more attention-consuming than what had just happened.

"Erm... Where did you go?" she finally asked.

Harry repeated the story, dramatically abbreviated: they had gone to fight the Death Eaters, they had defeated Ganon, and the Triforce of Courage now belonged to him.

"So Link and Zelda are *dead*?" Ginny said in a horrified whisper, clapping a hand over her mouth. "That's horrible!"

"No, not really," Harry told her, shaking his head. "They were ready for it. It is too bad that they didn't get to say goodbye, though..."

Ron cocked his head curiously. "What d'you mean?"

Bewildered, Harry said, "I mean...they just disappeared, and you guys are never going to see them again, and they didn't even get to say goodbye to you."

His voice faded away as he noticed Hermione smiling sadly and shaking her head. Still completely confused, he watched her lean forward in her chair and rummage through her book bag, pulling out a thick stack of parchment.

"We found these in their rooms," Ron explained. "Thought we'd hang onto them... You should probably keep them."

Harry glimpsed two different kinds of handwriting—neat and elegant script, and endearingly childish printing—as Hermione handed the parchment to him.

"Here," she said simply, smiling.

Riffling through the pages, Harry found he couldn't breathe, because his heart had swollen and was constricting his throat as it pounded hard. The manuscripts were like diaries, chronicling in massive detail everything that the Hylians had done, clearly written with the intent of being left behind and read by their new friends. Harry caught snatches of phrases, and a smile slid onto his face almost without his consent.

...a different world, but really great...you guys are priceless...would never have believed...feels like home...so much fun...never forget anything...

"They did say goodbye..."

Because his attention fell to and remained on Link and Zelda's journals once he had them, Harry didn't get much of a chance to talk to anyone until early that afternoon, just after lunch, as the Gryffindor Quidditch team gathered themselves for a training session. Though no one said it, Harry knew they were all wondering if their captain would be feeling up to a practice; the truth was that he was as eager as ever he had been to get outside and take to the air, for the weight of the world had been gradually lifting off of his shoulders all day, and he wanted to revel in this new freedom. It took only a few minutes for the rest of the team to realize that they had no reason to be on tenterhooks around him, and resume their normal behaviour. By the end of a tough two hour practice, he was feeling back up to a hundred percent, so much so that he lingered in returning to the change rooms after he sent his teammates to do so. On the pretence of putting the ball crate away, he slowly walked to the storage shed and enjoyed the sights, smells, and feelings of the outdoors. He could easily understand why Link loved being a child of the forest...and why Sirius had been unable to handle being trapped indoors for so long the previous year...

"Harry?"

His heart stopped in his chest at the sound of the voice behind him. He would have been lying if he'd claimed it was unexpected, but that didn't make it any less difficult to turn around and face it.

Which, somehow, he did nevertheless.

"Hi, Ginny."

She looked very small, nervous and fidgety, just as she had done the first time he had met her, and even for a long time after that. She clutched her broom tightly in one hand, like a support, and shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she met his gaze uncomfortably.

"Listen...er...about earlier..." she began, and he had a feeling she had been mentally rehearsing these words. "I was... I was just really

happy to see that you were okay and everything... I didn't...mean..." She tapered away to nothing, with a pleading note in her voice that left Harry completely lost. If she hadn't meant it, why had she done it? And why did she now sound so desperate for him to say...something, he could tell, though he couldn't have guessed what. Maybe she just wanted him to confirm that there was nothing between them.

And if that was the case, why was he not simply doing so and moving on?

"Right," he choked out. "Yeah. I...er...I know. Of course."

And why did she now look, not as relieved as he would have expected, but faintly disappointed?

:Harry, you're an idiot.:

Blinking in surprise, Harry could think of no response to this. Fortunately, he didn't need to, as Link continued.

:Look, I've never been subtle before, and I don't plan to change that, so I'm gonna jump in here and be the proverbial fairy under your hat. She likes you. She's waiting for you to say you like her back. Which you do. Don't even bother trying to deny it, there's no point.:

:So...what do I say?: Harry thought blankly, though half of him still objected feebly that Link was wrong.

:Tell her the truth. That you don't think that kiss meant nothing, that you don't want it to mean nothing, that she's sweet and you care about her, and you think she cares about you, too...and say it fast, before she gets away.:

At these words, Harry realized that Ginny was indeed walking towards the change rooms and away from him. His voice leapt out of his throat before he could stop it.

"Hey, Ginny! Wait up!"

Harry had no idea what had just happened. But whatever it was, it had involved him finding himself unable to stop talking once he started, and then Ginny jumping in as well, and then both of them just talking over each other without really listening, but not really needing to, because each knew what the other was saying, and then, somehow, him kissing her, or else maybe her kissing him, and then both of them laughing at something but not knowing what, and managing to establish, at some point between babbling mindlessly and laughing in exactly the same way, that they both felt the same way about each other, and then making it official.

Which was why they were now walking back up to Gryffindor Tower hand in hand. As boyfriend and girlfriend. And Link's voice in Harry's mind wasn't the only one laughing hysterically—his own consciousness was, as well. He supposed this internal laughter was his own way of coping with the disbelief and bewilderment that were still hazing over the rational part of his mind. It was all just so unbelievable, that all he could do was laugh.

Next to him, Ginny, let out a quiet noise of good humour, clearly a small taste of what she was struggling to hold back.

"What's funny?" he asked curiously.

Voice trembling with uncontrollable hilarity, Ginny shook her head and said, "I have no idea."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, struggling just as much as she was, "me, neither."

They were still laughing at nothing when they fell through the portrait hole together, to find Ron and Hermione sitting by the fire.

"*There* you are!" Hermione said indignantly. "Ron got back and he said you hadn't even started changing yet... What took you so long?"

"And what's so funny?" Ron put in.

Harry grinned at Ginny, who was making a valiant effort not to dissolve into further peals of giggling, which in and of itself of course only made the urge more irresistible.

"Funny story, actually..." Harry began.

And he related succinctly what had just happened.

"So lemme get this straight," Ron jumped in at the end. "You two are going out?"

Ginny shrugged, still smiling. "I guess so, yeah."

Hermione cast a sideways look at Ron, apparently reserving her own reaction until he gave his.

"Well," he said carefully, "you realize, Harry, that I will of course have to kick your ass if you hurt her."

"I know."

Ron nodded. "Just so long as we're clear on that." Then he cracked a smile. "But seriously, it's about time."

Hermione beamed at them fondly, clearly relieved that Ron was handling this comparatively well. "I'm happy for both of you."

First thing the next day, after an early breakfast, Harry went with Ron and Hermione to visit Hagrid; Ginny hadn't done any homework yet that weekend, and desperately needed to catch up, or else she would have come with them. They hadn't visited the groundskeeper in far too long, because they had been occupied with the Hylans. Harry had of course thought they should meet, when the visitors had first arrived, but Hermione had pointed out that they might not get along.

"What are you talking about?" Harry had disagreed, bewildered. "They love animals, don't they? Link does, at least."

"Yes," Hermione had admitted, "but I think they might have slightly different opinions on...well...more aggressive and dangerous ones."

At these words, the mental image had sprung into Harry's mind of what would happen if Zelda and Link got into a disagreement with

Hagrid on the virtues (or lack thereof) of what he would term "interesting creatures" and they would term "murderous monsters," the types of things that Hagrid kept as pets and that Link made a point of killing before they killed him. So Harry had conceded that Hermione's point was a good one, and due to Link's later confrontation of Aragog, he was glad he had done so.

Now that the Hylians had gone, though, Harry and his friends needed to catch up with Hagrid, and tell him everything that had gone on in their lives.

When they arrived at Hagrid's modest home, they found him arriving as well, from a venture into the Forest.

"'Bout time yeh dropped by!" he said, grinning beneath his beard when he spotted his visitors. "Yeh're not too busy with yer new friends ter come an' have a cuppa with me, then?"

"Sorry it's been so long, Hagrid," Hermione said, smiling back. "We were really busy, though."

"Yeah, I know," he chuckled, waving away their apologies. "With yer homework an' yer Quidditch an' tryin' ter save the world... I don' blame yeh none."

As they took their seats around the table, Hagrid bustled around the sink to make some tea. As he did, he continued to talk.

"So I don' need ter ask what's goin' on in yer lives, then, do I? I've seen yeh practicing with yer new toys, Harry."

Laughing, Harry said, "You mean my sword and bow?"

"Tha's the ones," Hagrid agreed, handing around three mugs of tea. "Link's been helpin' yeh with 'em, isn' tha' right?"

"Er...yeah. Yeah, he was."

"Was?" Hagrid echoed, frowning over his own drink. "Not any more? Summat happened?"

Harry exchanged a look with Ron and Hermione, before saying slowly, "Well...didn't you hear what happened yesterday?"

Hagrid leaned forward in his chair interestedly. "No, I didn' hear nuthin' 'bout anythin' after I brought yeh the Thestrals. Wha' did happen?"

With a sigh, Harry explained, "After we fought, Link and Zelda died."

Choking on his sip of tea, Hagrid asked, "Wha' did yeh say? They *died*?"

"Yeah," Harry said wearily, nodding. "But it's okay, they're fine, and we're keeping in touch."

Raising his bushy eyebrows, Hagrid asked, "Yeah? How's that?"

"Telepathy," Ron spoke up, "between Harry here and Link in the Sacred Realm."

"I can't believe it's never occurred to anyone before to use telepathy to cross the borders between the worlds of the living and the dead," Hermione said thoughtfully, talking more to herself than anyone else. "But I suppose no one really wants to blur that line, do they?"

"So yeh can talk ter him whenever yeh want, eh, Harry?" Hagrid asked, placing his mug down onto the table.

Harry nodded.

"Well, tell 'im hi from me."

This time, it was Harry, Ron and Hermione who all choked into their drinks.

"Tell—But you never met him," said Ron, sounding slightly alarmed as he glanced wildly at Hermione and Harry. "Did you?"

"O' course I did," Hagrid said, looking around at them and clearly surprised at their reactions. "Why wouldn' I?"

"Well...well, we just thought..." Hermione stammered uncertainly, but she apparently didn't know where her sentence was going, because she let it fade away and looked to Harry for help.

"When did you meet him, Hagrid?" Harry managed to ask.

"He came by, roun' abou' the same time he started trainin' you up ter be the next hero," Hagrid explained. "Wanted ter talk about Aragog."

Harry's heart stopped in horror, and to judge by how pale Ron and Hermione had suddenly become, theirs had as well.

"About...about Aragog?" Harry forced out, his voice sounding somehow higher pitched than usual.

Nodding, still looking doubtful about their stability, Hagrid explained, "Said he'd had a run-in with all Aragog's kids in the Forest. Said you were there, too, Harry. Weren' yeh?"

"Yes," Harry admitted slowly, "but I didn't know you knew about it..."

"Yeh didn' wan' me ter find out what had happened ter Aragog, did yeh?" Hagrid said in an abnormally shrewd tone.

Harry opened his mouth, but had no idea what to say. Glancing at Ron and Hermione, he saw that they were just as dumbfounded.

"Did you... Did Link tell you?" he said, his throat dry.

Hagrid nodded seriously. "Yep. Told me Aragog had mentioned me jus' before he died, so he figured we were friends. Course, that didn' stop Link killin' him, bu'..." He paused, suspended momentarily in thought, then snapped out of his reverie to take another sip of tea.

"What else did Link say?" Hermione asked softly, breaking the silence.

"Well," Hagrid began, leaning back again in his chair, apparently trying to recall the conversation, "told me that he was sorry he'd had ter do it, bu' he'd jus' had ter do it. Said tha' these types o' spiders aren' meant to live in a fores' like this one, an' I did know that already,

but I thought Aragog was learnin' fine. Look how big his family was gettin' an' all! Centaurs never liked 'im much, though...ruddy mules," he added irritably, and Harry shared his sentiment. "Anyway, we got ter talkin', an' I definitely wasn't happy that Link had ter go an' kill one o' my friends, bu' he told me how Aragog's kids were tryin' ter kill him an' Queen Zelda, an' yeh, too, Harry. Didn't want ter believe him, 'cause Aragog's always been fine with me, but I could tell Link wasn't the type who'd jus' say summat like that if it weren't true, yeh know? We had a good, long talk about it, an' we settled some things, an' in the end I guess I can't really blame 'im... He's a soldier, o' course, bu' he also knows what he's talkin' abou' when it comes ter animals an' stuff. Grew up in a fores', yeh know, an' later he worked on a ranch. 'Sometimes yeh jus' have ter let 'em go, Hagrid,' he tells me. 'I don't ever like havin' ter kill summat, bu' sometimes yeh jus' have no choice.' It's true enough, I know that. He was real sorry, an' he knew I was still upset an' all, bu' he still stood by what he'd done." Hagrid paused again, a slight crease in his brow. "An' it's funny, but even though he's not some fancy nobleman or nuthin', somehow yeh can't help thinkin' that he knows best."

An odd silence fell. As impossible as it seemed to Harry for anyone to actually care about the monster that was Aragog, it seemed equally impossible (if not more so) for someone who *did* care to be so comfortable discussing its death. Even though he knew exactly what Hagrid meant about Link—like Zelda, he just gave off an aura, greater than simply his mystical glow, of some strange wisdom of experience, and it was something no one could help trusting—he also knew that no one could help grieving the loss of a loved one.

"So...are you okay, then, Hagrid?" Ron asked uncertainly, apparently thinking the same thing.

"Oh, I'm all righ', sure," Hagrid said dismissively, waving a massive hand. "Ter tell yeh the truth, I was kinda expectin' it soon. Aragog was gettin' old. More'n fifty years old, ter be exact. Blind an' gettin' pretty weak an' all... An' he didn't get along with the centaurs, like I said, an' this type o' fores' isn't where he was meant ter be, like Link said, an'...he didn't much get along with Grawp, either..."

Of course, Harry thought. If Hagrid's half-brother and old friend were in conflict, and the old friend wasn't happy with his living situation to begin with, there must have been a part of Hagrid that was grateful that Aragog was at least now at peace.

"Bu' why are we talkin' 'bout all this sad stuff?" Hagrid asked abruptly, with a short laugh. "There's gotta be a Quidditch game comin' up soon or summat, righ'? Who's playin'?"

It was such an obvious attempt to change the subject that they all indulged it, even Hermione, who didn't much follow Quidditch beyond knowing that Gryffindor had a tendency to win every game they played. The conversation moved from sports to school to other areas, and Hagrid laughed heartily when he learned that Harry and Ginny were now a couple.

"Yeh'll have ter keep him in check, then, won' yeh, Ron?" he pointed out, beetle eyes twinkling.

"You got that right," Ron agreed, but he, too, was smiling.

Hermione laughed as well, and Harry merely shook his head and tried to look annoyed at having his personal life become the subject of conversation. But the fact was, he greatly preferred discussing such everyday, typically teenage occurrences to trying to understand the grand scheme of destiny, and where he fit into time itself.

Chapter Seventeen—The New Triforce

Although Zelda had described the Sacred Realm to Link, he could never have imagined what it would be like to actually be there. He remembered and recognized the familiar feeling of divinity that permeated the air, the aura that he had felt when he had come to the Chamber of Sages during his quest to defeat Ganondorf. But to be standing in a Hyrule Field that was so much more real than the Hyrule Field he had always known, with Malon in his arms again for the first time in much too long, with Harry's family and friends mingling with his own for the first time now that they had come together... Zelda had laughed at him, because it was such an incomprehensibly wonderful experience that he didn't know what to react to first—how proud he was to see who his grandchildren's children had grown into; how much Lily Potter looked and acted like Malon; how his daughter, Saria II, had been talking non-stop since his arrival and he had only managed to take in about half of all she had said; how much chaos the world would have been subjected to if he had been contemporary with Sirius and James; how strange it was to see his daughter, Nathana, and the other two demi-gods looking like the immortal deities they were; how much fun it was for everyone to be an Animagus; or how he hadn't yet run into half the people he wanted to see again, including his father, Barive, and his best friend, Saria I...

He was standing back now, trying to calm the millions of thoughts that were hurtling through his mind as he watched all the introductions and tearful reunions that were taking place. He and Zelda had missed a noticeable portion of the eternity that they could have spent with their loved ones (though they would now have the rest of eternity to make up for it), and while she was at the moment attempting to see through her joyful tears to hug everyone she had ever known, Link felt that it was about all he could take after the initial burst of welcoming (which had taken quite a while and been interrupted by conversations with Harry) to stand just outside the centre of everything, smiling, with one arm around Malon, who was leaning against his shoulder with her own arms around his waist, as contented to be next to him again as he was to have her there.

It was just a good thing there was no such thing as time here in the Sacred Realm, because he had a lot to do. Not that time had ever really been able to tie him down, anyway, he added mentally with a smirk.

"Link—There's someone I want you to meet."

That was Barive's voice behind him. Still grinning at the sight of the exploratory interaction between everyone he or Harry had ever loved, Link turned to see what was his father wanted.

His smile dropped away instantly in shock, as everything around him fell out of his awareness.

Link could probably count on one hand the number of times he had cried over the course of his existence. He usually wasn't one to express his emotions through tears, no matter how angry or sad he was. But he had never felt this way before; he was overcome with dizzying numbness as his heart rose up to his throat, and he tears burned in his eyes.

She stood hand in hand with Barive. Her bright blue eyes were identical to Link's own, right down to the tears that brimmed within them. And he only knew one thing about her.

"Mom..."

Even as she nodded, he felt as though he were suddenly five years old, needing to be warm and safe in her arms. They fell together, he clinging to her so tightly that it would have been painful, if he had been able to feel pain, and she holding onto him just as desperately.

This was Alea Dassin, the one woman he had never gotten a chance to speak to, to say goodbye to, to thank for giving him his life, to tell how much he loved her, to hold right here where she belonged. Next to his heart.

As she clung to him just as intensely as she would life itself, he felt her tears against his skin.

"Link..." she breathed. "Oh, my baby boy...I love you so much..."

"Mom..." he whispered again, trembling.

He had never been able to call anyone by that title, and she had never been able to hear it. It was beautiful.

"Mom...Mother...Mommy..."

"Oh, Link..."

When they finally parted enough to look into each other's faces, though without letting each other go, he couldn't help being amazed at how much he really did look like her. His father had always told him so, but having not seen his mother since he was a baby, he hadn't known firsthand how true this was. It also struck him how much Alea looked like Zelda, being her aunt, and left him wondering faintly how no one had realized for nearly twenty years that he and the queen were cousins.

With a shadow of a smile, she touched his face and said, "Look at you... You're all grown up. I remember when you were just a little baby, in my arms, and now..."

"He's a good man, Alea," spoke up Barive, smiling in rapture at the sight of the reunion between his wife and their only child. "Did pretty well for himself."

Alea laughed quietly, still staring at her son. "I know he did. But he can't be a *man*!" she added, making a face and beaming. "He's just a little boy!"

Now it was Link who laughed, and he heard Malon do the same as she approached, separating from the crowd of people from Harry and Link's lives, who were all still eagerly getting to know each other and tracing their family trees now that they suddenly found themselves connected.

"Oh, Malon! Have you met my mom?" Link asked enthusiastically, taking her arm to bring her forward.

"Of course I have," she told him. "We've been here for a few thousand years waiting for you, we've gotten to know each other

pretty well. And, of course," she added with a devious smirk, "I've now heard all the obligatory humiliating stories from the first year of your life."

"Oh, goddesses," Link muttered, rolling his eyes. "Thanks a lot, Mom."

"What's a mother for, if not to make you look stupid in front of the girl you like?" Alea asked with a laugh.

"Yeah, yeah... Well, come on, then," he said, taking a seat right there on the grass and indicating for her to do the same.

"What do you mean?" Alea asked, puzzled, as she, Barive, and Malon sat next to him.

"I wanna hear those stories, too."

Most of Hogwarts cared that Link and Zelda were gone, though they were prevented from grieving by the fact that Harry didn't seem to care. He had not sunk into the silent, empty isolation that had followed the deaths which had occurred in previous years; he continued to laugh with his friends, play Quidditch and do homework with the usual amount of enthusiasm (or, in the latter case, of complaints). He didn't even avoid talking about the loss of the Hylians. But perhaps the most shocking of these small behaviour details was the fact that he had been heard, on more than one occasion, to mention the name *Sirius*...without sinking in a grief so deep that he was lost for hours or even days.

To the amazement of everyone but Ron and Hermione, Harry's emotional wounds were healing enough that he could quiet casually mention instances such as the time, before he had even known he was a wizard, that he had dreamed about his godfather riding on his trademark flying motorcycle. But it was still explicitly taboo to mention the Department of Mysteries or a particular Death Eater named Bellatrix Lestrange. No one was clear why, but some gossipy whispers told them that the reason was Sirius.

They all noticed more significant changes in Harry as well, such as the hours he spent alone on the grounds, and the fact that he carried some unidentified object on his back, underneath his robes. Presumably Ron, Hermione and Ginny knew what it was, but no one else did.

Only one person drove Harry to show them all this secret.

It was a Wednesday, and Harry was on his way to lunch with Ron and Hermione, as the three of them had just left Charms together. Then he heard a voice that never failed to make his blood churn with rage.

"Father just can't believe how easily the Ministry can be bought. I mean, of course *our* money was always enough motivation to earn their support, but it came with our good name attached. And now they're think about handing out honours to blood traitors and half-bloods... You heard they're talking about giving Black a posthumous Order of Merlin? Have you ever heard anything more ridiculous?"

"*Don't rise*," Hermione hissed automatically, sensing Harry clench his fists with anger as the Slytherins laughed.

"Well," Malfoy went on, still speaking loudly enough to be audible across the Entrance hall, "unless you count the fact that they're also thinking about giving Potter the Order, for falling into the You-Know-Who's traps...how many times is it now? Next thing you know, his parents are going to earn it for so skilfully having gotten themselves killed."

Harry heard Crabbe and Goyle's dull chuckles, and Malfoy's sharp laughter, more loudly. He didn't hear Ron and Hermione warning him in low voices to stay calm, though they grabbed him as he whirled around. His blood was pounding in his skull.

It was as dramatically staged a scene as it could have been. Harry stood at the bottom of the sweeping marble staircase, and Malfoy stood at the top; each was flanked by his two best friends. The crowd, sensing the resurrection of an epic conflict, cleared out of the path between them.

Furiously, in ringing tones, Harry shouted up the stairs, "If you've got something to say about me or my family, why does you say it to my face, Death Eater?"

Malfoy stood perfectly still, sneering. "All right, I will, if you want the whole school to hear it this time." He cleared his throat with the air of one about to make an important proclamation.

"Say whatever you want," Harry consented grimly, reaching over his shoulder. "I'm listening."

With that, there was an audible gasp from the crowd as he drew the Master Sword from its sheath, with the slick sound of metal against deadly metal. The flawless blade gleamed menacingly, looking sharp enough to cut light itself.

Malfoy hitched his sneer, which had flickered, back up into place. "You don't know how to use that thing," he declared derisively.

In answer, Harry smirked humourlessly. He twirled the weapon before him, tossed it in the air, caught it with his left hand, swung it around behind him, threw it again so that it flipped in midair behind his back, caught it again with his right hand, and pointed it directly at Malfoy. Raising one eyebrow, he commented coolly, "You sound pretty sure about that."

Next to him, Harry heard Ron stifle a laugh; Crabbe and Goyle were exchanging nervous glances at the realization that Harry had a weapon greater than their own muscles.

"Like you would actually use that on me," Malfoy jeered, with an admirable attempt at his usual aloof sarcasm.

"What, you think I carry it around for no reason?" Harry inquired, raising his other eyebrow into an expression of mild surprise. He lowered the blade and started up the stairs towards his enemy, speaking casually as he went. "No, Malfoy, actually, I carry it around because it chose me. I'm sure you remember Link, that visitor we had for awhile? Well, turns out I'm his heir, so with him gone, I get my inheritance. Which includes this fine weapon,"—he twirled the sword

again—"as well as certain talents which enable me to use it. I'm officially a True Hero now, see, because I have...this."

Halfway up the stairs, Harry paused in his tracks. He had been just waiting for this moment, when he could show off to Malfoy his new powers. He crossed his right arm over his body, holding the sword horizontally just below his eyes, so that the back of his hand faced Malfoy. Though the Triforce mark here had faded to become so pale that no one would normally notice it, he could make the insignia show itself at will, and this he did now. The triangles glowed with impressive brightness, and hushed murmurs of amazement spread through the crowd. Harry delighted inwardly in seeing Malfoy's face go slack with dumbfounded shock.

"That's a little something called the Triforce of Courage," Harry went on, explaining to the crowd at large. "Also known as the power of the goddesses. And it's mine now."

"So?" Malfoy retorted, finding his voice again. "Big deal. The Dark Lord as it, too, and so does Dumbledore!"

Harry lowered his sword, a look of mock sorrow on his face. "Oh, darn," he said with as much irony as he could muster. "You mean I'm just equal with Dumbledore and scary old Lord Voldemort?" He smirked again when Malfoy and his cronies looked alarmed at the sound of the name. "Well, that's too bad. I guess I don't stand a chance against you, huh?"

There followed a long silence, during which neither Harry nor Malfoy moved. Then, abruptly, Harry raised his sword and made as if to swing it towards the three Slytherins; though he didn't actually attempt to strike, Malfoy flinched and moved to shield himself, and Crabbe and Goyle nearly fell over each other in their efforts to get out of his range. Harry laughed at the sight of the pair of them tumbling onto the stone floor, and Malfoy's look of fury at his backup, as if they had humiliated him.

"Get over yourself, Malfoy," Harry said. "This sword is meant to be used by the True Hero, which is me, against real evil...which is not a wannabe like you."

He sheathed the sword on his back and strode back down the stairs to Ron and Hermione, with whom he walked into the Great Hall for lunch as though nothing had just happened, looking out for Ginny as he went. After a stunned silence, the crowd in the Entrance hall filled in the space they had cleared for the confrontation between two of Hogwarts most omnipresent rivals.

"Harry..." Hermione began, as they took their seats at the Gryffindor table.

"Is this gonna be a lecture?" Ron interjected.

"Well...no, more of a...question."

Harry looked up from the plate he was piling with food and frowned curiously at her. "Okay, shoot."

"Why did you do that?"

Ron sighed loudly. "That's how lectures start, Hermione."

"No, really, I'm asking. It just seems out of character for you to be threatening Malfoy with a sword like that. You never would have done that before."

"I never had a sword before."

"Harry, you know what I mean," she replied. "What's changed?"

As Ron snorted, Harry asked, "Since when?"

Hermione rolled her eyes impatiently, and began to say, "Harry..."

"Hermione, it's a legitimate question. A ton of things have changed recently. Where do you want me to begin?"

She looked intently at him, as though trying to see through his face and into his mind; he returned her gaze, breaking off only when Ginny appeared and he turned to briefly kiss her hello as she sat down for a meal.

"Start with Link," Hermione decided. "And Sirius."

Ron gave her a sharp look. Even he, notorious for being oblivious about the emotions of others, knew that bringing up Sirius when Harry hadn't done so first could be a dangerous move. But Harry wasn't bothered.

"All right, then," he sighed, considering this. "Link... Well, I told you how much he reminds me of Sirius."

They nodded.

"Okay. And I guess maybe that's why I started...facing facts," Harry began awkwardly, staring at his plate and not really seeing it, and trying to understand his own words as he spoke. "After Sirius died, I...I don't know what I did, but I know I never got a chance to get over it. I never got to be as angry or as sad as I wanted to be, so it all just built up. Then when Link came, and he started teaching me to fight and everything...but he was also telling me how much he loved his family. It was like he was telling me that, even in the middle of trying to save the world, it's okay to have feelings of your own. I never realized I always thought that I couldn't let myself be happy or sad or anything, because there was so much else that I was supposed to be doing..."

His voice faded away thoughtfully. Ginny opened her mouth to speak, but cut herself off when Harry continued to do so.

"And when we were fighting Voldemort...Bellatrix was there. She was just everything, everything that I was...furious and miserable at. I couldn't help it. And Remus was there, too, and he was the other side of it all. I just wanted it to *end*, I wanted to let everything inside me get out and *win*. I almost did let it. I actually almost killed her. I came really, really close."

"Oh, Harry..." Hermione breathed in quiet horror, as Ginny let out a stifled gasp and Ron froze, wide-eyed, with a forkful of mashed potatoes halfway to his mouth.

"But I stopped myself," Harry added. He did not elaborate.

"Why?" asked Ginny gently, when it became apparent that he wouldn't continue on his own.

"Because it was wrong," he said simply. "It wasn't meant to happen that way."

This time, it was Ron who encouraged him further after a brief silence. "So then...what does all this have to do with Malfoy?"

Harry blinked, remembering what had started this conversation. "Oh, right. I guess it's just...that experience taught me that I need to admit stuff out loud and not keep it all bottled up, or else I'll just explode like that." With a smile, he elucidated, "It's better for me to admit Malfoy's annoying and threaten him than it is to claim he's not getting to me and end up going on a mad Slytherin-attacking rampage or something, right?"

Hermione and Ron exchanged looks, and Ron said slowly, "Well, actually, if those are the only two options..."

With a scoff of impatience, whose effect was diminished by the smile she couldn't hide entirely, Hermione gave Ron a swat on the arm. Ginny laughed, and Harry smiled as well.

"The point is, I know now. It's like I told Link, we've got to share everything."

"You're getting awfully philosophical," Hermione observed with an amused smile of her own. "That's not like you, either."

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, well, I've been through a lot. But I'm still Harry."

"Who's the British record holder for fastest Snitch catch in history?" Ron demanded.

Caught off guard, Harry answered, "Er...Roderick Plumpton. Tutshill Tornados."

"In what time?" Ginny piped up instantly.

"Three and a half seconds."

Ron nodded, satisfied. "Yep, you're still Harry."

:*Just older and wiser.*:

:*Move your feet, Harry, move your feet! You're like a rock, kid, move!*:

Link was never more strict and serious that when he was giving instructions in armed combat; he always emphasized the last words of his every sentence and, for some reason, called his protégé "kid." Harry paused and lowered his sword to catch his breath.

:*The enemy isn't taking a break, kid.* Link informed him sullenly.

:There's no enemy, Link: Harry replied. :Just in case you hadn't noticed.:

He meant, of course, that there was no enemy standing right in front of him. There was always an enemy lurking somewhere, or else he wouldn't have been training. He spent hours out on the castle grounds when he had nothing else to do, practicing with his bow and sword. Miming fights on his own was something Link called *dorok na sor*—"dancing with air." Harry was learning to speak and read ancient Hylian on top of everything else, and Ron and Hermione left him to it. It gave them time together, and besides, they knew that he would always come back and tell them everything that was on his mind. Always. Their friendship was changing shape as they grew older, but it remained just as solid.

In a way, Harry had become more isolated. Having a clearer understanding of his destiny, and having all his fears about it removed, he devoted more time to working towards it. He also found that some good *dorok na sor* after a hard day really helped him relax, much as a good Quidditch practice had been known to do. Link was always there and willing to coach him, with Harry's parents and Sirius close at hand to watch and pass on their thoughts to the boy they all considered a son. Sometimes even Zelda was around, or Malon, or their families; Link and Malon had two daughters, Saria and Nathana, while Zelda and Chezdon had three children, Princess Rilla, Prince Danion and Prince Taizu, and there were also siblings, cousins, spouses, grandkids, and more—not to mention the Potter and Evans families. And Harry indirectly met them all. In fact, as his telepathic powers became stronger, he even spontaneously developed more connections with some of the Hylians, such as Zelda and Saria

(though Link had pointed out, so as not to get Harry's hopes up, that such connections couldn't spring up with people who hadn't established telepathic skills before death).

Though he was assured he would meet everyone in person when he went to the Sacred Realm after dying, Harry already felt like he'd known them all when they were alive.

Dumbledore, as always, was a reassuring presence, even if he wasn't doing anything other than just being there. So, too, was Ginny, though it was still bizarre at times to think of her as his girlfriend. But sometimes, no matter how open he was with all the people that supported him, Harry still felt small, weak, and consumed with pain. In these moments, when the dead of night crept into his soul, he had two possible courses of action. One was to write to Remus.

Whenever I think there's nowhere to turn, I know you're just around the corner. You're the one I turn to last, because you're the strongest cure for the sickness that eats me alive sometimes. You're the last person I know is still living when I feel like the world is death.

In these letters, Harry found unusually poetic sentences flowing from his quill like thoughts swirling in a Pensieve. Sometimes he didn't even send the letters off with Hedwig, because it was enough just to put his thoughts on paper. The knowledge that he could send them if he wanted to was enough.

If Remus wasn't the one he wanted to talk to, he could venture out onto the grounds. He had added three tombstones to the graveyard, each marked with the words "In Memoriam" and topped with a stone figurine of an animal: a lion, a panther, and a large dog. Chiselled on the first two were simply the full names of the people they honoured: *Sir Link Hero* and *Queen Zelda Hyrule*, but the third had a longer inscription:

Sirius Black

Godfather

Loyal friend

Noble hero

Harry often visited these stone tributes and stared at the words written upon them, stared into the eyes of the stone dog, gemstones that sparkled like stars. He would have liked Remus to see them.

: Your dad and dear godfather are laughing their heads off at my dad, and it's driving him crazy.:

Saria's laughing thoughts snapped Harry back to the present. :Why?: he asked. It was Zelda who answered.

:Because Sirius said Link was being too serious, and then Link said maybe he wasn't being serious enough. So you can imagine where they took it from there. "You can't get anymore serious than Sirius!" "Serious is my middle name! No wait, it's my first!" And so on.:

Harry laughed quietly aloud. :Well, it is funny.:

Link's thoughts came next, in a concerned tone. *:I don't know about these guys, Harry... horrible puns and cheesy wisecracks are supposed to be my department.:*

But across two dimensions, they were all laughing at the same joke.